

The Individual and the Collective: Integrity as a Solo Act, Corruption as a Syndicate in the Ugandan Context

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Abstract: This study investigated the asymmetrical dynamics between integrity as an individualized practice and corruption as a collective syndicate in Uganda, examining how corruption operated through sophisticated networks with mutual protection mechanisms while integrity practitioners faced isolation, vulnerability, and professional penalties. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study collected quantitative data from 384 respondents across public institutions, private organizations, and civil society groups using structured questionnaires, and qualitative data from 25 key informants including whistleblowers, anti-corruption practitioners, and former corruption network participants through in-depth interviews. Data analysis utilized univariate analysis to examine distributions and central tendencies, bivariate analysis including correlation coefficients and chi-square tests to explore relationships between variables, and Structural Equation Modeling to test complex theoretical pathways involving organizational culture, network effects, institutional protection, and career outcomes. The univariate results revealed substantial asymmetries with corruption network strength scoring high ($M=3.87$, $SD=0.92$) while integrity support systems scored dismally low ($M=2.14$, $SD=0.78$), institutional protection mechanisms were virtually absent ($M=1.98$, $SD=0.85$), and perceived risks of ethical conduct were exceptionally high ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.74$), creating an environment where integrity practitioners experienced severe vulnerability ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.81$) and limited willingness to report corruption ($M=2.31$, $SD=1.05$). The bivariate analysis uncovered strong correlations demonstrating that corruption network strength actively marginalized integrity practitioners ($r=0.742$, $p<0.001$), inadequate institutional protection suppressed corruption reporting ($r=0.681$, $p<0.001$), corruption network participation correlated positively with career progression ($r=0.528$, $p<0.001$) while integrity behavior correlated negatively with career advancement ($r=-0.456$, $p<0.001$), and chi-square analyses confirmed significant associations between network membership and favorable career outcomes ($\chi^2=127.83$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.576$). The Structural Equation Modeling demonstrated excellent model fit ($CFI=0.961$, $TLI=0.954$, $RMSEA=0.046$, $SRMR=0.041$) and revealed that organizational culture was the strongest predictor of corruption participation ($\beta=0.512$, $p<0.001$), corruption networks operated through peer pressure mechanisms that mediated participation ($\beta=0.293$, $p<0.001$), individual ethical orientation influenced integrity behavior ($\beta=0.627$, $p<0.001$) but required institutional protection which partially mediated this relationship ($\beta=0.156$, $p<0.001$), and critically, corruption network protection mechanisms provided stronger career benefits ($\beta=0.534$, $p<0.001$) than integrity support systems ($\beta=0.417$, $p<0.001$), creating a structural advantage for corruption. The study concluded that Uganda's anti-corruption efforts had failed because they approached corruption as individual moral failure rather than organized collective enterprise, and that effective interventions required collectivizing integrity through robust peer support networks, genuine whistleblower protection with career safeguards, transformation of organizational cultures, and creation of institutional environments where integrity practitioners could operate with collective protection comparable to corruption syndicates. The research contributed theoretically by demonstrating the applicability of organized crime syndicate frameworks to understanding institutional corruption, methodologically by employing sophisticated SEM techniques to model complex corruption-integrity dynamics, and practically by providing evidence-based recommendations for structural reforms including establishment of Integrity Practitioners Networks with legal defense funds and peer support systems, comprehensive whistleblower protection legislation with career safeguards and retaliation penalties, and organizational culture transformation through structural incentive realignment with integrity-weighted promotion criteria and corruption network disruption protocols, thereby offering a roadmap for shifting the balance of power from corruption syndicates to collective integrity systems in Uganda and similar contexts where corruption had become systematically entrenched.

Key Words: Solo Act and Corruption

Introduction of the Study

Corruption in Uganda presents a paradoxical challenge where individual acts of integrity struggle against deeply entrenched collective systems of malfeasance. While integrity often manifests as a solitary pursuit requiring personal courage and moral fortitude, corruption operates through sophisticated networks, cartels, and syndicates that span across public institutions, private enterprises, and political structures (Karim et al., 2023; Nguyen Chau et al., 2024; Ramoni-Perazzi & Romero, 2022). This study examines the asymmetrical nature of ethical conduct versus corrupt practices in Uganda, where those who choose to maintain integrity frequently stand alone against powerful, interconnected systems designed to perpetuate corrupt behavior. The Ugandan context provides a compelling case study for understanding how corruption has evolved from isolated incidents into organized, systemic networks that transcend individual institutions. Despite constitutional provisions, anti-corruption frameworks, and the existence of oversight bodies such as the Inspectorate of Government, corruption persists as a collective enterprise involving multiple actors who provide mutual protection, share proceeds, and maintain omertà-like codes of silence (Gumisiriza & Kugonza, 2020; Pdu et al., 2023; Soni & Smallwood, 2024). Conversely, individuals who demonstrate integrity often face isolation, career stagnation, threats, and ostracization from their professional communities (Hauser, 2019; Julián & Bonavia, 2022; Nambassa & Qodir, 2024).

This research explores the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that enable corruption to thrive as a syndicate while integrity remains largely an individual burden, and examines the implications for anti-corruption strategies in Uganda.

Background of the Study

Uganda's struggle with corruption has been well-documented since independence, but the nature and organization of corrupt practices have transformed significantly over the decades. Following the political instability of the 1970s and 1980s, the National Resistance Movement government that assumed power in 1986 initially prioritized anti-corruption reforms, establishing institutions such as the Inspector General of Government and later the Anti-Corruption Court. However, despite these institutional frameworks, corruption has not only persisted but has become increasingly sophisticated and collective in nature (Mlambo, et al., 2019; Phionah et al., 2023; Sheila et al., 2023). Various reports, including those from Transparency International, consistently rank Uganda poorly on corruption perception indices, with the country scoring 26 out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. What distinguishes Uganda's corruption landscape is the networked nature of corrupt activities, often involving procurement fraud, embezzlement of public funds, bribery, and patronage systems that require coordination among multiple actors across different levels of government and private sector entities (Ariyo et al., 2023; Jacob, 2024). High-profile cases such as the misappropriation of Global Fund resources, the GAVI scandal, and numerous procurement irregularities in infrastructure projects reveal patterns of organized collusion rather than isolated individual misconduct.

Meanwhile, Ugandans who have attempted to expose corruption or maintain professional integrity have frequently faced severe consequences. Whistleblowers have been transferred to remote posts, denied promotions, threatened, or forced to leave public service entirely (Alinaitwe & Ayesiga, 2013; Ivan & Chaya, 2020; Kwenda & Ntuli, 2018). The lack of effective whistleblower protection mechanisms and the prevalence of impunity for powerful corrupt actors have created an environment where integrity is punished rather than rewarded. This dynamic has contributed to a normalization of corruption and a culture of silence, where the risks of standing alone against corrupt networks far outweigh the perceived benefits of ethical conduct (Maria, 2024a; Moskovics et al., 2024; Seepma et al., 2021).

The sociocultural context also plays a significant role, where communal obligations, patron-client relationships, and extended family expectations can pressure individuals to participate in or tolerate corrupt practices. The tension between individual moral agency and collective social pressures creates a complex environment where choosing integrity can mean defying not just institutional norms but also cultural expectations and social networks.

Problem Statement

Uganda's anti-corruption efforts have largely failed to stem the tide of corrupt practices, in part because they approach corruption as a problem of individual moral failure rather than as an organized, collective phenomenon. Current anti-corruption strategies emphasize individual accountability, ethical training, and punishment of individual offenders, yet these measures have proven inadequate against corruption networks that operate with collective protection, shared resources, and mutual accountability systems that shield members from consequences (Ariyo et al., 2024; Maria, 2024b; Uster & Jill Margaret, 2025). The fundamental problem is the asymmetry between how integrity and corruption operate in Uganda. Integrity demands that individuals act alone, often at great personal cost, without institutional protection or collective support systems (Julius, 2024; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025). In contrast, corruption functions through well-organized syndicates where risks are distributed, proceeds are shared, and members protect each other through complex networks of complicity. This creates a structural disadvantage for ethical conduct, where the costs of integrity are individualized while the benefits of corruption are collectivized (Chen, 2022; EL Bizri et al., 2023; Stavale et al., 2022). Furthermore, the isolation of integrity practitioners means that ethical individuals lack the networks, resources, and mutual protection mechanisms available to corrupt actors. Whistleblowers and those who refuse to participate in corrupt schemes face retaliation without adequate legal protection or institutional support (Agustina & Eddy, 2024; Singha, 2023; Werbner & Werbner, 2020). This imbalance perpetuates a vicious cycle where corruption is reinforced through collective action while integrity withers through individual isolation. Without understanding and addressing the collective, syndicated nature of corruption versus the isolated nature of integrity, anti-corruption interventions will continue to be ineffective. There is a critical need to examine how corruption networks form, operate, and perpetuate themselves in the Ugandan context, and to explore strategies for collectivizing integrity to create peer support systems, protection mechanisms, and communities of practice that can counterbalance the power of corruption syndicates.

Main Objective of the Study

To analyze the asymmetrical dynamics between integrity as an individualized practice and corruption as a collective syndicate in Uganda, and to develop recommendations for strengthening collective integrity systems that can effectively counter organized corruption networks.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the organizational structures, networks, and mechanisms through which corruption operates as a collective enterprise across public and private institutions in Uganda.
2. To investigate the challenges, risks, and costs faced by individuals who demonstrate integrity in corrupt environments, including the lack of institutional protection and support systems.
3. To identify and propose strategies for building collective integrity frameworks, peer support networks, and institutional mechanisms that can protect and empower individuals who choose ethical conduct over corrupt practices.

Research Questions

1. How do corruption networks in Uganda organize, coordinate, and protect their members, and what are the structural characteristics that enable corruption to function as a syndicate rather than as isolated individual acts?
2. What are the specific consequences and vulnerabilities experienced by individuals who maintain integrity in corrupt institutional environments, and why do current whistleblower protection and anti-corruption mechanisms fail to provide adequate support?
3. What models, strategies, and institutional reforms could enable the collectivization of integrity in Uganda, creating support systems and networks that provide protection, resources, and mutual accountability for ethical practitioners comparable to those enjoyed by corruption syndicates?

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine the asymmetrical dynamics between integrity and corruption in Uganda. The research was conducted across multiple public institutions, private sector organizations, and civil society groups in Uganda's central region, with purposive and snowball sampling techniques used to identify and recruit participants who had either witnessed or experienced corruption networks or had demonstrated integrity in corrupt environments. A total of 384 respondents were selected for the quantitative component using Yamane's formula for sample size determination, while 25 key informants participated in in-depth interviews, including former and current public servants, whistleblowers, anti-corruption practitioners, and reformed individuals who had previously participated in corrupt networks. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires with Likert-scale items measuring variables such as corruption network strength, integrity support systems, institutional protection mechanisms, perceived risks of ethical conduct, and organizational culture, alongside semi-structured interview guides that explored personal narratives, experiences with corruption syndicates, and challenges faced by integrity practitioners. Quantitative data analysis began with univariate analysis to examine the distribution, frequency, and central tendencies of key variables including the prevalence of corruption networks, levels of institutional support for integrity, and individual vulnerability scores, followed by bivariate analysis using chi-square tests, correlation coefficients, and independent t-tests to explore relationships between variables such as the association between corruption network density and integrity practitioner isolation, the relationship between whistleblower protection mechanisms and willingness to report corruption, and differences in career progression between individuals who complied with versus resisted corrupt practices. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then employed to test complex theoretical relationships and pathways, specifically examining how organizational culture, peer pressure, and institutional protection mechanisms mediated the relationship between individual ethical orientation and actual integrity behavior, how corruption network characteristics (size, coordination, protection mechanisms) influenced individual participation in corrupt acts, and how collective integrity support systems moderated the relationship between individual integrity and career consequences. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically using NVivo software, and analyzed through content analysis to identify patterns, mechanisms, and structures of corruption syndicates, personal costs of integrity, and potential strategies for collectivizing ethical conduct. The SEM analysis utilized maximum likelihood estimation with bootstrapping procedures to assess model fit through indices including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), while path coefficients revealed the strength and significance of relationships between latent constructs such as "corruption syndicate strength," "integrity isolation," "institutional protection," and "ethical behavior outcomes (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023)." Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive nature of corruption research, with informed consent obtained from all participants, anonymity and confidentiality strictly maintained through coded identifiers, data stored securely with restricted access, and special protections provided for whistleblowers and vulnerable informants who faced potential retaliation risks. The integration of quantitative statistical rigor through univariate descriptive analysis, bivariate relationship testing, and sophisticated SEM modeling with qualitative depth from personal narratives provided a comprehensive understanding of how corruption operates collectively while integrity remains individualized in the Ugandan context, thereby directly addressing all three research objectives and generating evidence-based recommendations for policy interventions.

Results

Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Key Study Variables (N=384)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Corruption Network Strength (1-5 scale)	3.87	0.92	1.00	5.00	-0.83	0.45
Integrity Support Systems (1-5 scale)	2.14	0.78	1.00	4.80	0.61	-0.32
Institutional Protection Mechanisms (1-5 scale)	1.98	0.85	1.00	4.50	0.89	0.28
Perceived Risk of Ethical Conduct (1-5 scale)	4.21	0.74	2.00	5.00	-1.12	1.38
Individual Vulnerability Score (1-5 scale)	3.95	0.81	1.50	5.00	-0.76	0.52
Career Progression Rate (promotions/5 years)	0.87	1.12	0.00	5.00	1.45	2.18
Willingness to Report Corruption (1-5 scale)	2.31	1.05	1.00	5.00	0.43	-0.68
Organizational Culture Tolerance (1-5 scale)	3.76	0.88	1.00	5.00	-0.58	0.15

The univariate analysis revealed significant asymmetries in the structural characteristics of corruption versus integrity in Uganda's institutional landscape. Corruption Network Strength demonstrated a substantially high mean score of 3.87 (SD=0.92), indicating that respondents perceived corruption networks as well-established and robust, with the negative skewness (-0.83) suggesting that the distribution was concentrated toward higher values, meaning most respondents experienced strong corruption networks rather than weak ones. In stark contrast, Integrity Support Systems showed a markedly low mean of 2.14 (SD=0.78), indicating minimal institutional or collective support for individuals attempting to maintain ethical standards, while Institutional Protection Mechanisms scored even lower at 1.98 (SD=0.85), revealing a near absence of effective safeguards for integrity practitioners and whistleblowers. The positive skewness in both these variables (0.61 and 0.89 respectively) indicated that the distributions were skewed toward lower values, confirming that most respondents experienced very limited support and protection systems. The Perceived Risk of Ethical Conduct yielded an alarmingly high mean of 4.21 (SD=0.74) with strong negative skewness (-1.12) and positive kurtosis (1.38), demonstrating that the vast majority of respondents perceived maintaining integrity as highly risky, with responses heavily concentrated at the upper end of the scale and showing a peaked distribution that underscored the uniformity of this perception across the sample.

These univariate findings provided compelling empirical evidence for the central thesis that corruption operated as a well-organized collective phenomenon while integrity remained dangerously individualized in Uganda. The substantial gap between Corruption Network Strength (M=3.87) and Integrity Support Systems (M=2.14) represented a difference of 1.73 points on the five-point scale, which translated to approximately 35% higher organizational capacity for corruption compared to integrity, a statistically and practically significant disparity that explained why corruption persisted despite anti-corruption efforts. The exceptionally low score for Institutional Protection Mechanisms (M=1.98) was particularly troubling, as it fell below the theoretical midpoint of 3.0 by more than one full point, indicating that existing legal frameworks, whistleblower protection policies, and institutional safeguards were either non-existent or completely ineffective in practice. This finding aligned with documented cases where Ugandan whistleblowers faced retaliation, dismissal, or threats without recourse, and suggested that policy reforms had failed to translate into functional protective mechanisms on the ground. The Individual Vulnerability Score (M=3.95, SD=0.81) further confirmed that integrity practitioners felt exposed and defenseless, scoring nearly at the maximum of the scale, while the low Willingness to Report Corruption (M=2.31, SD=1.05) demonstrated a rational response to the high-risk, low-protection environment where reporting misconduct offered minimal benefits and substantial personal costs. The Career Progression Rate showed considerable variability (SD=1.12) with positive skewness (1.45) and high kurtosis (2.18), suggesting that while most individuals experienced limited career advancement (clustering near zero promotions), a small subset achieved rapid progression, likely those who participated in or tolerated corrupt networks, which would be further explored through bivariate analysis. The high Organizational Culture Tolerance for corruption (M=3.76) indicated that corruption had become normalized within institutional environments, creating social pressures that made integrity a deviant rather than normative behavior, thereby compounding the isolation experienced by ethical individuals.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Relationships Between Key Variables (N=384)

Variable Pairs	Pearson r	p-value	Chi-square (χ^2)	Effect Size (Cramér's V)
Corruption Network Strength × Integrity Practitioner Isolation	0.742**	<0.001	-	-
Institutional Protection × Willingness to Report Corruption	0.681**	<0.001	-	-
Corruption Network Strength × Career Progression (Compliant)	0.528**	<0.001	-	-
Integrity Behavior × Career Progression (Non-compliant)	-0.456**	<0.001	-	-
Organizational Culture Tolerance × Individual Participation	0.637**	<0.001	-	-
Whistleblower Protection × Actual Reporting Behavior	-	-	89.45**	0.482
Network Membership × Career Outcomes	-	-	127.83**	0.576
Integrity Support Systems × Vulnerability Reduction	0.594**	<0.001	-	-

Note: ** indicates significance at p<0.01 level

The bivariate analysis uncovered strong and statistically significant relationships that illuminated the mechanisms through which corruption syndicates flourished while integrity practitioners suffered in Uganda's institutional context. The correlation between Corruption Network Strength and Integrity Practitioner Isolation was exceptionally high ($r=0.742$, $p<0.001$), indicating that approximately 55% of the variance in integrity practitioner isolation could be explained by the strength of corruption networks, a large effect size by conventional standards that demonstrated how powerful corruption syndicates actively marginalized ethical individuals. Similarly, the positive correlation between Institutional Protection and Willingness to Report Corruption ($r=0.681$, $p<0.001$) revealed that approximately 46% of variance in reporting willingness was attributable to perceived institutional protection, confirming that individuals made rational calculations about self-preservation when deciding whether to expose misconduct. The relationship between Corruption Network Strength and Career Progression for compliant individuals showed a moderate positive

correlation ($r=0.528$, $p<0.001$), while Integrity Behavior and Career Progression for non-compliant individuals demonstrated a moderate negative correlation ($r=-0.456$, $p<0.001$), providing empirical evidence that participating in corruption networks offered career advantages while maintaining integrity incurred professional penalties. The chi-square analyses yielded particularly striking results, with Network Membership and Career Outcomes showing a highly significant association ($\chi^2=127.83$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.576$), indicating a large effect size where network membership was strongly associated with favorable career trajectories, while Whistleblower Protection and Actual Reporting Behavior also showed significant association ($\chi^2=89.45$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.482$) with medium-to-large effect size, confirming that the absence of protection mechanisms directly suppressed whistleblowing behavior.

These bivariate findings substantiated the asymmetrical power dynamics between corruption syndicates and isolated integrity practitioners, revealing systematic patterns of advantage for the former and disadvantage for the latter. The exceptionally strong correlation between Corruption Network Strength and Integrity Practitioner Isolation ($r=0.742$) was particularly revealing, as it demonstrated that corruption networks did not simply coexist with integrity practitioners but actively worked to isolate, marginalize, and neutralize them, suggesting that corruption syndicates perceived ethical individuals as threats to their operations and deliberately employed exclusionary tactics, social ostracism, and professional marginalization to maintain their dominance. This finding aligned with syndicate behavior observed in organized crime literature, where groups systematically eliminate or neutralize threats to collective interests. The significant positive relationship between Institutional Protection and Willingness to Report Corruption ($r=0.681$) underscored a critical policy implication: the low levels of institutional protection observed in Table 1 ($M=1.98$) directly explained the low willingness to report corruption ($M=2.31$), creating a vicious cycle where inadequate protection discouraged reporting, which in turn allowed corruption to flourish unchallenged, while the absence of reports reinforced the perception that corruption was either acceptable or too dangerous to confront. This relationship suggested that substantial investments in genuine whistleblower protection mechanisms could yield significant increases in corruption reporting, potentially disrupting corruption networks by breaking their protective walls of silence.

The contrasting correlations between network participation and career outcomes provided perhaps the most damning evidence of institutional capture by corruption syndicates. Individuals who complied with corruption networks experienced positive career progression ($r=0.528$), while those who maintained integrity experienced negative career progression ($r=-0.456$), creating a perverse incentive structure where rational career-oriented individuals were economically and professionally motivated to abandon ethical standards and join corrupt networks. The chi-square analysis reinforced this pattern with a large effect size (Cramér's $V=0.576$), indicating that network membership was one of the strongest predictors of career success in the sampled institutions, stronger than merit, qualifications, or performance. This finding exposed a fundamental failure of Uganda's public service management systems, where promotion mechanisms had been captured by corruption networks to reward complicity and punish dissent. The moderate correlation between Organizational Culture Tolerance and Individual Participation ($r=0.637$) revealed how institutional norms and peer pressure channeled individuals toward corrupt behavior, with approximately 41% of variance in individual participation explained by organizational culture, demonstrating that corruption was not merely an individual moral failure but a socially constructed and institutionally reinforced phenomenon. The positive relationship between Integrity Support Systems and Vulnerability Reduction ($r=0.594$) offered a glimmer of hope, suggesting that where support systems existed—however limited—they did provide meaningful protection, indicating that scaling up collective integrity frameworks could potentially shift the balance of power, though the low baseline levels of such systems ($M=2.14$ from Table 1) meant that substantial institutional reforms would be necessary to achieve meaningful impact.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results - Path Coefficients and Model Fit Indices (N=384)

Model Pathways	Standardized β	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
Direct Effects					
Organizational Culture \rightarrow Individual Corruption Participation	0.512	0.067	7.64	<0.001	[0.381, 0.643]
Corruption Network Size \rightarrow Individual Participation	0.438	0.059	7.42	<0.001	[0.322, 0.554]
Individual Ethical Orientation \rightarrow Integrity Behavior	0.627	0.054	11.61	<0.001	[0.521, 0.733]
Institutional Protection \rightarrow Integrity Behavior	0.384	0.062	6.19	<0.001	[0.262, 0.506]
Mediation Effects					
Ethical Orientation \rightarrow Inst. Protection \rightarrow Integrity Behavior	0.156	0.038	4.11	<0.001	[0.082, 0.230]
Corruption Network \rightarrow Peer Pressure \rightarrow Participation	0.293	0.051	5.75	<0.001	[0.193, 0.393]
Moderation Effects					
Integrity Support \times Ethical Orientation \rightarrow Career Outcomes	0.417	0.073	5.71	<0.001	[0.274, 0.560]
Network Protection \times Participation \rightarrow Career Advancement	0.534	0.068	7.85	<0.001	[0.401, 0.667]

Model Fit Indices: $\chi^2(df=156) = 243.68$, $p<0.001$; CFI = 0.961; TLI = 0.954; RMSEA = 0.046 [90% CI: 0.037-0.055]; SRMR = 0.041

The Structural Equation Modeling analysis demonstrated excellent model fit across all major indices, with the Comparative Fit Index (CFI=0.961) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI=0.954) both exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.95 for excellent fit, while the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.046, 90% CI: 0.037-0.055) fell well below the 0.06 cutoff for good fit, and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR=0.041) was below the 0.05 threshold, collectively indicating that the hypothesized theoretical model provided an excellent representation of the observed data and that the relationships between latent constructs were well-specified. The direct effects revealed that Organizational Culture exerted the strongest influence on Individual Corruption Participation ($\beta=0.512$, $p<0.001$), meaning that for every one standard deviation increase in organizational culture tolerance of corruption, individual participation increased by 0.512 standard deviations, explaining approximately 26% of the variance in participation and confirming that institutional norms were powerful determinants of individual behavior. Corruption Network Size also demonstrated a substantial direct effect on participation ($\beta=0.438$, $p<0.001$), indicating that larger, more visible corruption networks normalized corrupt behavior and facilitated recruitment. On the integrity side, Individual Ethical Orientation showed the strongest direct effect on Integrity Behavior ($\beta=0.627$, $p<0.001$), accounting for approximately 39% of variance, while Institutional Protection demonstrated a moderate but significant effect ($\beta=0.384$, $p<0.001$), explaining an additional 15% of variance, suggesting that while personal ethics were important, institutional support was also critical for translating ethical orientation into actual integrity behavior.

The mediation and moderation analyses revealed complex pathways that explained the mechanisms through which corruption syndicates and integrity systems operated. The mediation effect showing that Institutional Protection partially mediated the relationship between Ethical Orientation and Integrity Behavior ($\beta=0.156$, $p<0.001$) indicated that even individuals with strong ethical orientations required institutional support to act on their values, with approximately 20% of the total effect of ethical orientation operating through institutional protection mechanisms (calculated as indirect effect/total effect). Similarly, Peer Pressure significantly mediated the relationship between Corruption Network characteristics and Individual Participation ($\beta=0.293$, $p<0.001$), demonstrating that corruption networks operated not just through direct recruitment but through creating social pressures and normative expectations that channeled individuals toward participation, with peer pressure accounting for approximately 40% of the total effect of network characteristics. The moderation effects were particularly illuminating, showing that Integrity Support Systems significantly amplified the positive relationship between Ethical Orientation and Career Outcomes ($\beta=0.417$, $p<0.001$), meaning that when support systems were strong, ethical individuals could maintain integrity without career penalties, whereas in low-support environments, ethics alone was insufficient to protect career trajectories. Conversely, Network Protection mechanisms moderated the relationship between Participation and Career Advancement ($\beta=0.534$, $p<0.001$) with an even larger effect size, indicating that corruption networks provided substantial career benefits to members, but these benefits were contingent on the network's ability to protect members from consequences, explaining why corruption syndicates invested heavily in developing mutual protection systems, patron-client relationships, and omertà codes that shielded members from accountability.

The SEM results provided sophisticated evidence for the systemic nature of corruption as a collective enterprise and integrity as an individualized struggle in Uganda, revealing not just that these dynamics existed but precisely how they operated through organizational, social, and institutional mechanisms. The finding that Organizational Culture was the strongest predictor of corruption participation ($\beta=0.512$) was particularly significant because it demonstrated that corruption was fundamentally a structural and cultural problem rather than an individual moral failure, challenging the dominant paradigm in Uganda's anti-corruption efforts which focused on individual accountability, ethics training, and punishment of corrupt individuals while neglecting the institutional environments that incentivized and normalized corrupt behavior. This finding suggested that anti-corruption interventions targeting individual moral reformation were addressing symptoms rather than causes, and that effective strategies must instead focus on transforming organizational cultures, reshaping institutional incentives, and disrupting the social normalization of corruption. The substantial direct effect of Corruption Network Size on participation ($\beta=0.438$) revealed how corruption reproduced itself through visibility and normalization—larger networks created the perception that "everyone is doing it," reducing moral inhibitions and increasing recruitment, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where corruption networks grew stronger as they grew larger, while the mediation through Peer Pressure ($\beta=0.293$) exposed the social mechanisms through which this occurred, showing that corruption networks deliberately cultivated peer pressure, social obligations, and group loyalty to bind members together and recruit new participants, operating with the sophisticated social psychology of organized criminal enterprises.

The integrity side of the model revealed both the potential and the limitations of individual ethical orientation in corrupt institutional contexts. While Ethical Orientation demonstrated a strong direct effect on Integrity Behavior ($\beta=0.627$), the substantial mediation through Institutional Protection ($\beta=0.156$, representing 20% of total effect) meant that ethics alone was insufficient—individuals with the strongest ethical convictions still required institutional support to translate those values into action, and in its absence, even ethical individuals were forced to compromise or withdraw from institutions entirely. This finding explained the brain drain and exit of talented, ethical individuals from Uganda's public service, as those who refused to compromise found the environment unsustainable. The moderation analysis provided the most actionable insights for policy reform, demonstrating that Integrity Support Systems could fundamentally alter the calculus for ethical individuals ($\beta=0.417$), transforming integrity from a career liability into a viable path when adequate support existed. However, comparing this moderation effect with the even stronger moderation effect

of Network Protection on corrupt career advancement ($\beta=0.534$) revealed the stark asymmetry at the heart of Uganda's corruption problem: corruption networks provided more powerful career protection and advancement for their members than integrity support systems provided for ethical practitioners, creating a structural advantage for corruption that could only be overcome through massive investments in integrity infrastructure that exceeded the protective capacity of corruption networks. The excellent model fit statistics (CFI=0.961, RMSEA=0.046) provided confidence that these findings were robust and that the theoretical framework accurately captured the complex interplay between individual agency, organizational culture, network effects, institutional support, and career outcomes, validating the study's central thesis that corruption operated as a well-organized syndicate with mutual protection systems while integrity remained a dangerous solo act, and pointing toward the necessity of collectivizing integrity through peer support networks, robust whistleblower protection, career safeguards, and cultural transformation to create a viable alternative to corruption syndicates.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrated that corruption in Uganda operated as a sophisticated collective enterprise characterized by strong network coordination, mutual protection mechanisms, and career advancement systems for participants, while integrity remained a perilous individual undertaking marked by isolation, vulnerability, and professional penalties. The univariate analysis revealed a stark asymmetry between robust corruption networks ($M=3.87$) and virtually non-existent integrity support systems ($M=2.14$), with institutional protection mechanisms scoring dismally low ($M=1.98$), creating an environment where maintaining ethical conduct was perceived as highly risky ($M=4.21$) and resulted in substantial individual vulnerability ($M=3.95$). The bivariate analysis uncovered strong correlations demonstrating that corruption network strength actively increased integrity practitioner isolation ($r=0.742$), that inadequate institutional protection directly suppressed willingness to report corruption ($r=0.681$), and that corruption network participation positively correlated with career progression ($r=0.528$) while integrity behavior negatively correlated with career advancement ($r=-0.456$), revealing a perverse incentive structure that rewarded complicity and punished ethical conduct. The Structural Equation Modeling provided sophisticated evidence that organizational culture was the strongest predictor of corruption participation ($\beta=0.512$), that corruption networks operated through deliberate peer pressure mechanisms ($\beta=0.293$), and that while individual ethical orientation influenced integrity behavior ($\beta=0.627$), this relationship was partially mediated by institutional protection ($\beta=0.156$), meaning ethics alone was insufficient without structural support. The moderation effects revealed that integrity support systems could protect ethical individuals' career outcomes ($\beta=0.417$), but corruption networks provided even stronger career protection for their members ($\beta=0.534$), creating a structural advantage for corruption that explained its persistence despite decades of anti-corruption reforms. These findings challenged the dominant paradigm that treated corruption as individual moral failure and instead revealed it as an organized, systemic phenomenon requiring equally organized, systemic responses. The study concluded that Uganda's anti-corruption efforts had failed because they approached corruption as a problem of individual accountability while ignoring its collective nature, and that effective interventions must focus on collectivizing integrity through robust peer support networks, genuine whistleblower protection with career safeguards, transformation of organizational cultures that normalize corruption, disruption of corruption network coordination and protection mechanisms, and creation of institutional environments where integrity practitioners could operate with the same collective protection, mutual support, and career security currently enjoyed exclusively by corruption syndicates. Without addressing this fundamental asymmetry between corruption as syndicate and integrity as solo act, Uganda would continue to witness the exodus of ethical individuals from public service, the normalization of corrupt practices as rational career strategies, and the perpetuation of corruption networks that undermined national development, public trust, and institutional effectiveness.

Recommendations

Establish Comprehensive Collective Integrity Networks: The government of Uganda should establish formally structured Integrity Practitioners Networks (IPNs) within and across public institutions, modeled on professional associations but specifically designed to provide peer support, legal assistance, career counseling, and protection for individuals committed to ethical conduct. These networks should include dedicated legal defense funds financed through parliamentary appropriation, confidential peer mentoring systems connecting integrity practitioners across institutions, secure communication platforms for sharing experiences and strategies, and formal partnerships with civil society organizations and international anti-corruption bodies to provide external oversight and support.

Implement Robust Whistleblower Protection with Career Safeguards: Uganda should enact comprehensive whistleblower protection legislation that goes beyond existing inadequate frameworks to include mandatory anonymous reporting mechanisms with independent investigation units outside regular institutional hierarchies, automatic transfer of whistleblowers to equivalent or superior positions in different institutions to prevent retaliation, statutory presumption that any adverse career action within three years of whistleblowing constitutes retaliation unless the institution proves otherwise with clear burden of proof, financial compensation for whistleblowers who suffer career harm equivalent to projected lifetime earnings losses, and criminal penalties including mandatory imprisonment for officials who retaliate against whistleblowers.

Transform Organizational Culture Through Structural Incentive Realignment: Given that organizational culture was the strongest predictor of corruption participation ($\beta=0.512$), Uganda must implement systematic reforms to transform institutional cultures by redesigning promotion and advancement criteria to explicitly reward integrity behaviors including documentation of

corruption resistance, whistleblowing, and ethical leadership as weighted factors in career progression decisions; establishing integrity quotas requiring that minimum percentages of leadership positions be filled by individuals with documented integrity track records verified by independent civil society monitors; implementing corruption network disruption protocols that mandate institutional restructuring and leadership replacement when corruption networks are identified, breaking up patronage systems and rotating personnel to prevent network reformation

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