Are Female Bureaucrats Less Likely To Solicit Bribes?[*]

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Abstract

Greater female presence in public institutions is correlated with lower levels of corruption. We conduct two survey experiments in Ghana to investigate whether end-users perceive women bureaucrats as less likely to solicit bribes than men. Our results show that respondents do not expect women bureaucrats to be less corrupt than men. Further, this result holds across bureaucrats with different levels of experience in the public sector. We use results from our second experiment to argue that bribe-taking rates are similar across genders because of equal financial pressures men and women face to contribute to their extended families. Our results cast doubt on the idea that women bureaucrats are an effective antidote to petty corruption.

Keywords: Corruption, Bribe, Bureaucracy, Gender, Networks.

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One in four service users pays bribes each year globally, with higher rates among the poor (Fried, Lagunes and Venkataramani, 2010) and urbanites (Pring, 2017). Some policymakers believe that increasing women's representation in bureaucracies is key to lowering rates of bribery. Prior studies have found that women have inherent or socially induced traits that make them more law-abiding than men and thus less likely to condone or engage in corruption (Dollar, Fisman and Gatti, 2001; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Women's lower rates of involvement in corruption may also result from relatively fewer opportunities to engage in corruption, especially in patriarchal societies (Goetz, 2007; Bjarnegård, 2013).

Despite policymakers' push to increase women's representation in the public sector in an attempt to reduce corruption (King and Mason, 2001), there is little experimental evidence to suggest that such a policy would be (or is) effective. Previous studies typically rely on observational data that compares the prevalence of corruption in contexts with more or fewer women in the public sector, either as politicians (Bauhr, Charron and Wängnerud, 2019; Dollar, Fisman and Gatti, 2001; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018) or bureaucrats (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007; Swamy et al., 2001). While valuable, this scholarship does not causally isolate the effect of gender on malfeasance.[1] Furthermore, the mechanism that drives any relationship between gender and corruption remains unclear.

We contribute to this literature in two ways. First, we assess the claim that female street-level bureaucrats are perceived by end-users as being less likely to extract bribes than their male counterparts. Second, we investigate three mechanisms that may explain any differences we observe between genders: (1) women have inherent or socially induced traits that make them less corrupt, (2) women are less corrupt because they have fewer opportunities to engage in corruption, and (3) women are less corrupt because they face less external financial pressure to support their extended families or kinship groups. Social pressure to donate to group members is a well-established source

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[1]However, see Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2019) who use instrumental variables to try to overcome these challenges.

of bureaucratic corruption in developing countries (Ekeh, 1975; Price, 1975).

We embedded two original studies – an audio experiment and a vignette experiment – into a survey of citizens in Ghana. Ghana has high rates of petty corruption, and society is male-dominated (Pring and Vrushi, 2019; Conceição et al., 2019). To measure corruption, we rely on end-users' perceptions of bureaucrats. As our data shows, these perceptions are often based on respondents' personal experience with bribe-taking.[2] Alternative ways to measure corruption include using bureaucrats' self-reports or secretly recording bureaucrats while they work. These two methods present methodological and ethical challenges. Bureaucrats have strong incentives to deny individual engagement with corruption. Secret recordings, in turn, may risk bureaucrats losing their jobs. To avoid these issues, we use end-user perceptions, and take steps to reduce response bias. Under the assumption that respondents' perceptions are based on reality, this is a valid approach to measurement.

In the audio experiment, respondents heard an exchange between a service user renewing their driving license and a bureaucrat. We randomized the gender of the bureaucrat and the length of time they have worked in the public sector. Varying the gender of the bureaucrat allows us to assess our first hypothesis that women bureaucrats are perceived as less corrupt than male bureaucrats. Varying the length of time the bureaucrat has worked at the driving license office allows us to test the second mechanism. We use time in office to proxy for potential opportunities to join corrupt internal networks. Finally, we use a vignette experiment to assess the third mechanism: varying the gender of bureaucrats, we ask respondents what share of the public official's monthly salary they would expect them to donate to their extended family.

Our results show no overall differences in respondents' expectations regarding male versus female bureaucrats. We also find no evidence in the full sample that respondents expect bureaucrats who have worked longer in the public sector to be more likely to solicit a bribe. These results hold

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[2]33% of the respondents in our sample paid a bribe in the last year.

for both the full sample and when we restrict the analysis to only respondents who have experience paying bribes.

The results from study two show that financial expectations are constant across genders. We use the vignette experiment results to explain the overall null findings in the audio experiments. We argue that a key explanation for female bureaucrats to solicit bribes at the same rates as males is because they face the same level of external pressure to contribute to their extended families.

Our results make two significant contributions to the study of corruption. First, we join a handful of studies that employ experimental methods to study petty corruption. This literature has assessed which citizen attributes or behaviors make them more likely to become victims of bribery (Fried, Lagunes and Venkataramani, 2010; Robinson and Seim, 2018), as well as characteristics of the bribe (Klašnja, Lupu and Tucker, 2020) and bribe environment (Armantier and Boly, 2011). To our knowledge, our study is the first to manipulate bureaucrats' characteristics to assess bribe solicitation experimentally. Second, our focus on mechanisms contributes to the study of gender and corruption. We explain the symmetry in bribe solicitation rates between genders with reference to the equality in the social pressure faced by bureaucrats.

Theory: gender and corruption

The presence of more women in public office has been associated with lower levels of corruption (Bauhr, Charron and Wängnerud, 2019; Dollar, Fisman and Gatti, 2001; Swamy et al., 2001), particularly in high-accountability contexts (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). This relationship is not explained by social and economic development, civic freedom, ethnic fractionalization, or education levels. Two dominant explanations for this correlation are risk aversion and opportunity.

Behavioral research shows that women tend to be more risk-averse than men (Croson and Gneezy, 2009; Eckel and Grossman, 2008; Seguino, Stevens and Lutz, 1996). Accordingly, female officials should be less likely to engage in corruption due to the risks of being caught or punished (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Consistent with this argument, Rivas (2013) shows

that female laboratory subjects who play the role of a public official are less likely to accept bribes than their male counterparts. Further, Barnes, Beaulieu and Saxton (2018) show that respondents who are told that females are more risk-averse believe that hiring more women in the public sector will reduce corruption.

Differential risk-aversion implies a causal effect between gender and misconduct in public office. To assess the extent to which gender alone determines an individual's propensity to engage in corrupt behavior, our first hypothesis is that *female bureaucrats are less corrupt than male bureaucrats* (H1).

The negative relationship between female participation and corruption has also been explained by opportunities: differential access to corrupt networks (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007; Bjarnegård, 2013; Goetz, 2007). Joining or developing a network of accomplices takes time, and there is evidence that public officials become more corrupt the longer they spend in office (Klašnja, 2015). Because women often constitute a minority in public institutions, they may find it challenging to penetrate established corrupt systems. If gender mediates opportunities for corruption, then women, on average, will engage in fewer corrupt practices than men (Goetz, 2007). This argument implies that those who have worked longer in the public sector – and thus have greater exposure to corrupt networks – are more likely to engage in corruption than relative newcomers. However, it could be the case that to engage in petty corruption bureaucrats do not rely on network membership. In this case, we may not see a relationship between experience and corruption. To assess the role of opportunities, we hypothesize that *experienced bureaucrats will be more corrupt than their less experienced counterparts* (H2).

A less explored mechanism that may also explain a negative relationship between female bureaucratic presence and corruption is differential pressures that males and females face to provide for their kinship groups. Well-educated members of kinship groups often experience positive and negative social pressures to supply benefits – often financial – to group members (Ekeh, 1975; Price, 1975). Bureaucrats who provide financial assistance often enjoy increased prestige within

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the group (Bates, 1974), while those who do not may be socially ostracized. Social expectations exert significant pressures on bureaucrats (Alhassan-Alolo, 2007).

If group pressures incentivize corruption, then any difference between genders in the extent of social pressure may also affect individual bureaucrats' propensity to engage in corrupt practices. For example, in male-dominant societies, male civil servants may face more pressure to distribute more or higher-value benefits than their female counterparts. If this is the case, we might expect males to be more corrupt than their female counterparts. To test this mechanism, our third hypothesis is that *male bureaucrats face greater financial pressure to provide for kinship groups than female bureaucrats* (H3).

Gender, corruption, and bureaucracy in Ghana

To examine the impact of bureaucrats' gender on levels of petty corruption, we conduct two survey experiments in Ghana. Like in many lower-income countries, both grand and petty corruption remains endemic. Ghanaians' main experiences with corruption occur through their everyday interactions with civil servants. Ghana ranks above the continental average in terms of the share of citizens who pay bribes: one-third of citizens paid a bribe to access public services in 2019 (Pring and Vrushi, 2019). Petty corruption remains high in Ghana partly because of its unreliable administration of public services (Gyimah-Boadi, 2008). In this study, we focus on citizens being asked for bribes when renewing a driving license. Agencies that issue IDs and police departments are the two most corrupt public sector organizations in the country (Pring and Vrushi, 2019).

Sample and Experimental Design

To test our hypotheses, we constructed a random sample of 1,268 citizens and conducted a face-to-face survey in three southern regions of Ghana: Greater Accra, Central, and Eastern. We stratified districts to ensure a mix of respondents living in urban and rural communities. Within districts,

we randomly sampled polling stations (N=139), from which we began a random-walk strategy to identify households before randomly selecting respondents. Our sample is representative of the sampled regions and broadly representative of the country.[3] Randomization was performed by the survey software. The balance tests in Appendix Section 2 demonstrate that the randomization process was sucessful.

In the audio experiment, we manipulated two variables. First, we varied the gender of the public official. Second, we randomized the bureaucrat's years of experience. The result is a 2×2 full factorial design. We cued the bureaucrat's gender through both their name and voice. To signal experience, we indicated how long they had worked at the institution. High-experience bureaucrats said they had worked in the agency for 12 years.[4] This information was included in a 40-second conversation between a civil servant working at the country's driving license authority and a citizen renewing their driving license. Respondents heard the conversation in their preferred language: English or Akan.[5] Respondents wore headphones to reduce potential response bias. After listening to the conversation, enumerators asked respondents how likely they thought it was that the civil servant would solicit a bribe. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale.

In the vignette experiment, we randomly varied the bureaucrat's gender, which we signaled using their name. Respondents were asked how much of the bureaucrat's monthly salary they should give to their extended family each month. The vignettes included identical information across the two treatment conditions regarding experience in office, salary, and a description of current tasks. To mirror the audio experience, in all cases, the bureaucrat was said to work at the

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[3]Appendix Section 1 describes our sampling procedure and provides details on the representativeness of the sample.

[4]The control group did not hear information about the bureaucrat's length of service; this gave us a clean baseline to compare with the "high" category. Our design is a reliable test of H2 as long as we assume that, on average, respondents exposed to the baseline category think the bureaucrat has spent fewer years working in the public sector than those exposed to the high-experience category.

[5]Akan is the dominant local language in the regions we study.

driving license office. After reading the vignette, respondents were asked what contribution they thought was reasonable. We convert this amount into the share of the civil servant's monthly salary.

Results from the audio experiment

The first hypothesis predicts that female bureaucrats are less corrupt than males. The top estimate in Figure 1 shows the average treatment effect of the bureaucrat's gender in the audio experiment.[6]

The results do not provide evidence that citizens expect female bureaucrats to behave differently from their male counterparts. Although the results show that female bureaucrats are expected to be slightly less likely than males to solicit a bribe, the difference is substantively small and indistinguishable from zero (-0.12; s.e. $= 0.09$). In short, our data show that citizens expect similar behavior from male and female bureaucrats.

We re-estimate this effect among respondents with direct experience of paying bribes. Respondents who recently paid a bribe may be more likely to base responses on actual experiences and to rely less on any gender stereotypes. One-third of survey respondents (33.1%) reported having previously paid a bribe in exchange for a public service.[7] Our results are robust to this analysis.[8]

To assess our second hypothesis, we first pool the treatment conditions by level of experience in office, irrespective of gender. The causal effect of experience is shown in the bottom estimate in Figure 1. According to the opportunities hypothesis, officials who have been in office longer should be perceived to be more likely to engage in corruption. On average, respondents perceive bureaucrats with high experience levels to be slightly more likely to solicit a bribe than less experienced bureaucrats. However, this difference is indistinguishable from zero and is substantively small (0.14; p-value $= 0.13$).

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[6]See Appendix Section 3 for corresponding regression table.

[7]This figure is similar to the results reported in the Afrobarometer.

[8]See Appendix Section 4.

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Figure 1: The causal effects of (a) gender and (b) years of experience on petty corruption
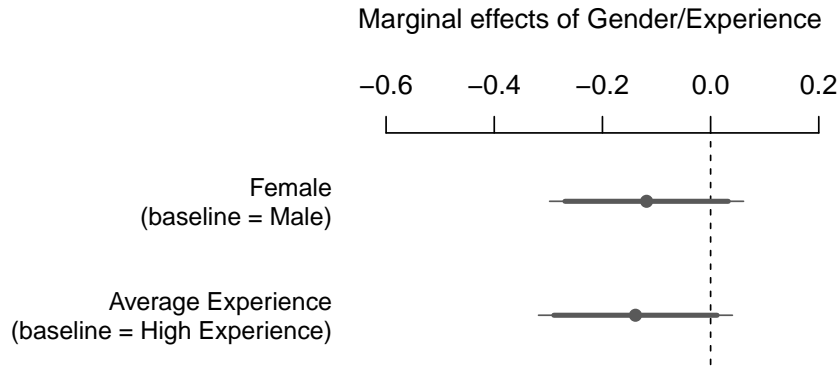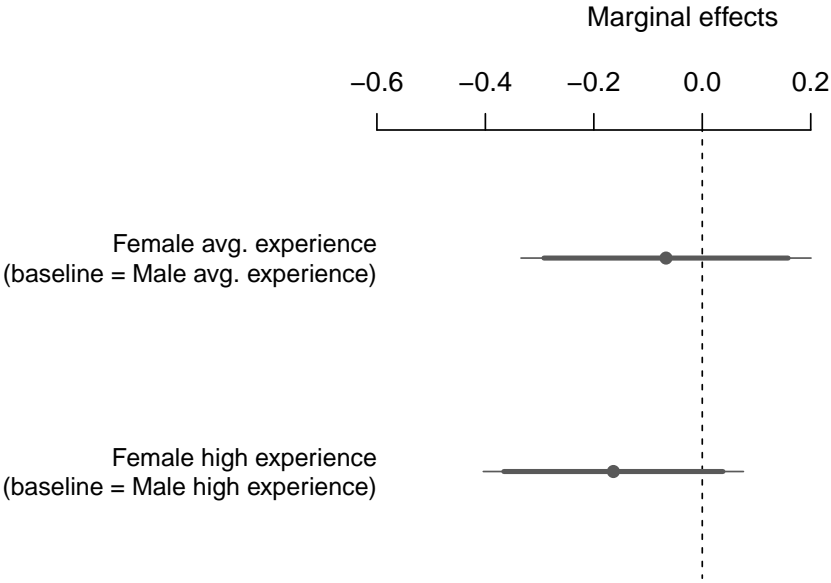
Marginal effects of Gender/Experience

Note: Points are estimates of the difference in the perceived likelihood that the public official will ask for a bribe according to their gender (top estimate) and experience (bottom estimate). Wider/thinner bars are 90/95% confidence intervals from linear regressions, with each treatment as the predictor.

We also assess the second hypothesis by comparing perceived rates of corruption between women and men with average levels of experience and high levels of experience. Figure 2 displays these results. We do not find evidence that women with fewer years experience in the public sector are less likely to take bribes than similarly placed male counterparts (difference in means $= -0.07$; s.e. $= 0.14$). We also do not find evidence that experienced male bureaucrats are more likely to take bribes than experienced female bureaucrats (difference in means $= -0.16$; s.e. $= 0.13$). Overall, these result suggests that women are just as able as men to navigate corrupt networks, and suggest that it does not take bureaucrats of either gender too long to do so.[9] Again, our results are robust to subsetting to only respondents with direct experience with petty corruption.[10]

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[9]We do find a statistically significant difference between experienced males and less experienced females. The difference-in-means is 0.25 and represents a 4.3% change in the outcome variable relative to its mean. This effect size is substantively small.

[10]See Appendix Section 4.

Figure 2: The causal effects of gender among bureaucrats with different levels of experience

Note: Points are estimates of the difference in the perceived likelihood that the public official will ask for a bribe according to their gender (top estimate) and experience (bottom estimate). Wider/thinner bars are 90/95% confidence intervals from linear regressions, with each treatment as the predictor.

Results from the vignette experiment

The final mechanism we assess is whether male bureaucrats face higher financial pressure to provide for kinship groups than female bureaucrats. The results show that our respondents – a representative sample of the wider Ghanaian population – expect street-level bureaucrats to pay a significant share (22.4%) of their monthly salary to family members. Furthermore, our results reveal that the financial expectations are similar for male and female bureaucrats (23.1% and 21.7%, respectively); the difference of 1.4 percentage points (s.e. = 1.1) is not statistically significant.

These findings have two important implications. First, they suggest that bureaucrats face pressure to redistribute a significant share of their salaries to their kinship networks. Given that many bureaucrats in Ghana do not feel that their salary is adequate and take out loans to cover their living costs (Luna, 2019), this represents an incentive to solicit bribes. Second, the findings reveal an important mechanism to explain why female and male bureaucrats behave similarly: they face equal pressures to provide for their kin.

Conclusion

Prior studies reveal a negative correlation between female presence in public agencies and corruption (Dollar, Fisman and Gatti, 2001; Swamy et al., 2001). These findings inspired several policy initiatives around the world. Our results cast doubt over the idea that efforts to recruit women to public office, although essential for numerous other reasons (e.g., O'Brien and Rickne, 2016), are likely to generate or sustain a reduction in petty corruption.

We propose two potentially important scope conditions for our results. First, these results are more likely to hold in contexts where petty corruption is routine, and civil servants are unlikely to be punished for it. Indeed, prior work on corruption and gender among politicians shows that female legislators only reduce corruption in high-accountability environments (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Second, our proposed mechanism relies on male and female bureaucrats

facing equal social pressures from their extended families. Such expectations may not be the case in more culturally conservative societies where women may be expected to contribute less to family budgets than males. This may reduce pressure on female bureaucrats to engage in corruption.

Our experimental designs have the advantage of estimating the effect of gender on petty corruption while minimizing social desirability bias. Similar experimental methods can easily be adapted to other contexts. Future studies can use this approach to assess whether our results travel to different settings or across types of public officials.

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Online Appendix (Supporting Information) for "Are Female Bureaucrats Less Likely To Solicit Bribes?"

Contents

1 Survey Descriptives

Table OA.1 displays the distribution of districts across regions within each category. We randomly sample one district from each of the nine categories. In the case of the Greater Accra region, where only one district is rural, we sample this district. Table OA.2 displays the nine districts in the sample. Finally, Table OA.3 describes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table OA.1: Distribution of districts within regions

	Rural	Peri-urban	Urban
Greater Accra	1	3	6
Central	3	10	4
Eastern	8	11	2

Notes: Urban districts are those in which over 70 percent of the population lives in communities defined as urban. Rural districts are those in which less than 32 percent of the population lives in communities defined as urban. Peri-urban districts are those inbetween. Source: Ghana 2010 Population and Housing Census, accessed on IPUMS International.

Table OA.2: Sampled districts within regions

	Rural	Peri-urban	Urban
Greater Accra	Dangme East	Ga West	Ashiaman
Central	Upper Denkyira West	Assin North	Effutu
Eastern	Kwahu North	East Akim	Lower Manya Krobo

Table OA.3: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents, by region

		Regions		
	All	Central Ghana	Eastern Ghana	Greater Accra
Age (years)	36.7	37.7	37.8	34.9
Female (%)	50.2	49.9	50.4	50.4
Primary completed or higher (%)	73.3	69.8	76.0	73.8
Married (%)	58.8	64.6	62.6	50.2
Christian (%)	89.8	91.8	92.9	85.4
Main ethnic groups (%)				
Akan	25.8	44.6	22.3	12.9
Ewe	14.1	4.4	21.8	15.7
Ga-Dangme	7.0	1.0	7.3	11.9
Northern	3.6	1.5	2.1	6.7

Note: Entries are percentages or average values for the 1,412 respondents.

2 Balance Tests

Table OA.4 provides a series of covariate balance tests. The results suggest that the randomization worked properly on these relevant observables. The likelihood ratio tests reported in the bottom panel show that including all seven covariates as predictors of treatment assignment does not improve fit relative to a null model.

Table OA.4: Covariate balance across treatment groups

	Male ↑ Experience	Female ↑ Experience	Male Av. Experience	Female Av. Experience	p-value
Age (years)	37.6	36.5	35.5	37.2	0.25
Female (%)	55.1	44.1	51.2	50.6	0.05
Primary + (%)	72.3	75.5	71.0	74.2	0.59
Married (%)	59.7	56.2	57.4	61.6	0.52
Christian (%)	86.8	90.4	92.1	90.3	0.16
Greater Accra (%)	37.5	39.8	33.7	33.3	0.26
Akan (%)	34.5	40.1	38.9	40.6	0.40

Likelihood Ratio Tests:

Male - Female bureaucrat	$\chi^2(7) = 7.8$	$Pr(> \chi^2) = 0.35$
High Experience - Av. Experience	$\chi^2(7) = 7.7$	$Pr(> \chi^2) = 0.36$

Note: Entries in the top panel are means of covariates across treatment conditions and p-values correspond to F tests of difference in means. The model fit of logistic regressions with treatment assignments as a function of all covariates was compared with the respective null model. The likelihood ratio tests described in the bottom panel do not reject the null models.

3 Supporting Analyses

Table OA.5: The effects of (1) gender and (2) experience on petty corruption. Complement to Figure 1

	Likelihood of asking bribe	
	(1)	(2)
Female bureaucrat	−0.118	
	(0.091)	
Average experience		−0.139
		(0.091)
Constant	5.981	5.989
	(0.065)	(0.064)
Observations	1,268	1,268
R^2	0.001	0.002
Adjusted R^2	0.001	0.001
Residual Std. Error (df = 1266)	1.629	1.628
F Statistic (df = 1; 1266)	1.675	2.307
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table OA.6: The effects of gender and experience on petty corruption. Complement to Figure 2

	Likelihood of asking bribe	
	(1)	(2)
Female bureaucrat with average experience	−0.067	
	(0.136)	
Female bureaucrat with high experience		−0.164
		(0.122)
Constant	5.884	6.071
	(0.098)	(0.086)
Observations	621	647
R^2	0.0004	0.003
Adjusted R^2	−0.001	0.001
Residual Std. Error	1.700 (df = 619)	1.556 (df = 645)
F Statistic	0.240 (df = 1; 619)	1.794 (df = 1; 645)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

4   Robustness Checks

Table OA.7: The effects of (1) gender and (2) experience on petty corruption. Subset to respondents with direct petty corruption experience

	Likelihood of asking bribe	
	(1)	(2)
Female bureaucrat	−0.150	
	(0.135)	
Female bureaucrat with high experience		0.078
		(0.135)
Constant	6.278	6.167
	(0.094)	(0.094)
Observations	420	420
R^2	0.003	0.001
Adjusted R^2	0.001	−0.002
Residual Std. Error (df = 418)	1.383	1.385
F Statistic (df = 1; 418)	1.239	0.336
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table OA.8: The effects of gender and experience on petty corruption. Subset to respondents with direct petty corruption experience

	Likelihood of asking bribe	
	(1)	(2)
Female bureaucrat with average experience	−0.245	
	(0.182)	
Female bureaucrat with high experience		−0.062
		(0.199)
Constant	6.365	6.196
	(0.128)	(0.138)
Observations	204	216
R^2	0.009	0.0005
Adjusted R^2	0.004	−0.004
Residual Std. Error	1.302 (df = 202)	1.459 (df = 214)
F Statistic	1.810 (df = 1; 202)	0.097 (df = 1; 214)
Note:		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01