



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# African Views of Chinese Engagement: The Political Economy of a Gender Gap

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## Abstract

Mass public opinion on globalization shows a persistent gender gap, but explanations for this gap differ. In the context of Africa, understanding this gender gap is particularly important because of women's growing representation in legislatures and the rapid expansion of global economic flows on the continent. Why are women on average more skeptical of foreign economic actors? We consider this question across Sub-Saharan African countries, using Chinese economic engagement as a salient, visible form of economic globalization. Numerous studies have explored the impact of China's presence on Africans' attitudes toward China, but we know little about a documented gender gap in these attitudes. We explore the roots of this gap from an angle of economic vulnerability, positing that women at higher risk of a negative economic impact of Chinese engagement are more likely to view China negatively than their male counterparts. Using multilevel analyses of up to 84,000 respondents from up to 37 countries, we find a consistent pattern of economic vulnerability explaining the gender gap in attitudes, and factors associated with economic security mitigating it. Our findings suggest that economic vulnerability shapes attitudes differently across genders, and that increasing representation of women in African legislatures may have implications for policies toward Chinese engagement.

**Keywords:** Africa; China; gender; trade; globalization; public opinion

For the past two decades, the expanding influence of China in Africa has impacted the lives and livelihoods of Africans in countless ways. China's engagement with the continent has borne both economic and social benefits. Africans have been able to take advantage of new employment opportunities with Chinese firms and use new roads, bridges, and rail systems built with Chinese

investment. China has also provided substantial development aid — often without prescriptive conditions — offering an alternative to United States and European Union aid regimes. At the same time, competition with cheaper imports from China has adversely affected local African merchants and manufacturers, while claims of poor working conditions, discriminating labor practices, and exceedingly low pay have circulated from Chinese companies operating on the continent. As debates about the impacts of China’s “scramble for Africa” have become more salient in the public discourse — and as China has become the continent’s largest trading partner and source of foreign investment — understanding public opinion toward China in Africa becomes all the more important.

While scholars have begun to explore public opinion on China across the continent, sparse attention has been paid to how women perceive Chinese influence in Africa — even though women are at the forefront of economic exchange with China. In marketplaces across the continent, we observe women reaping profit from the sale of inexpensive Chinese imports, just as their stalls sit next to Chinese traders competing for the same buyers of groundnuts, cassava, and dyed fabric.<sup>1</sup> How, then, do women in Africa perceive the Chinese presence on the continent? Are they more likely to hold negative views of China than their male counterparts in the region? Public opinion data indeed reveal a remarkable gender gap in attitudes toward Chinese engagement: on average, across African countries, women perceive China’s impact on their country’s economy more negatively than men (Hanusch 2012; Ishiyama 2023; Larue 2019). We explain this phenomenon by building on prominent perspectives in the literature: labor market competition, generalized economic insecurity and vulnerability, political and economic knowledge, and cultural concerns. Based on these perspectives, our theory emphasizes the driving force of economic insecurity and vulnerability in shaping perceptions of Chinese presence.

Our research design uses multilevel analyses of several waves of Afrobarometer data, a well-established public opinion survey that allows us to include voices from up to 39 African countries. These analyses suggest that, *within* countries, immediate economic concerns and cultural concerns do not explain why women are more critical toward Chinese engagement. Instead, we find that women are more critical of Chinese influence because of generalized concerns about economic vulnerability. *Between* countries, we find that higher levels of female education reduce the gender gap — again consistent with longer-term vulnerability concerns driving negative evaluations of China in Africa. We then illustrate our theoretical framework using qualitative evidence on female workers in the Chinese-owned textile factories of Lesotho, where reports of harsh working conditions and unfair labor practices help us discern women’s perspectives on the value of Chinese engagement in Africa.

As more African countries debate the merits of deeper ties with China, it becomes important to decipher the factors that shape variation in attitudes about China’s presence on the continent, including and especially gender. Exploring women’s views on China yields important insights with significant legislative implications. Women have become increasingly visible as “independent political actors” (Tripp 2001, 142) in Africa, dramatically increasing their

representation in legislatures to a regional average only topped by Latin America (Barnes and Burchard 2013; Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes 2020). More women are now present in decision-making — on policy toward China and other issue areas — and have the ability to represent the priorities of African women, a population marginalized from the halls of power in much of postcolonial Africa. And research suggests that in African legislatures, female members of parliament indeed use their position to articulate issues important to women on the continent (Clayton et al. 2019). Understanding the source of women's perceptions of China's role in Africa is therefore important to understanding both the origins of gender gaps in mass public opinion and the trajectory of African countries' China policy.

This study proceeds as follows. We first summarize the available evidence on African perspectives on China and the existence of a gender gap in attitudes on China, and international economic exchange more broadly. Next, we devise specific explanations and hypotheses as to why women are more skeptical toward Chinese engagement in Africa, and why these gender differences vary across countries as well. Our quantitative research design and analyses follow, in conjunction with qualitative evidence from the African continent and Lesotho in particular. We conclude with implications of our findings, especially given the rising role of female legislators in Africa and beyond.

## African Perspectives on China

As China continues to expand its infrastructural footprint and aid commitments on the continent, questions have arisen about whether Africans welcome Chinese economic engagement or distrust it. On the one hand, Chinese investments in large-scale infrastructure, resource extraction, and manufacturing in special economic zones have generated substantial employment opportunities for African workers (Hanusch 2012). Despite the dominant narrative that Chinese firms operating in Africa mostly employ Chinese nationals, Brautigam's 2009 study indicates that between 80% and 90% of workers in Chinese firms are African (Brautigam 2009, 229). At the country level, Chinese aid has been shown to stimulate economic growth in Africa and elsewhere (Dreher et al. 2021), in addition to shoring up the capacities of weak African states unable to deliver necessary public goods (Jauch 2011). At the household level, Chinese aid has improved development outcomes — such as educational attainment and child mortality — in areas exposed to it (Martorano, Metzger, and Sanfilippo 2020). The positive externalities brought by Chinese job creation and development aid could boost the perceptions of China among the African public.

On the other hand, many argue that Chinese foreign direct investment has neither contributed to human capital formation through knowledge spillovers, nor has it created beneficial linkages to local economies (Jauch 2011). Instead, it has disadvantaged certain African industries that have been crowded out by cheaper Chinese imports or that must now compete for the same export markets. Moreover, Chinese development aid has contributed to increased levels of local corruption around project sites (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018), while Chinese

funded ventures like the Malabo military base and Kampala's smart city surveillance technology project have strengthened the repressive powers of autocratic regimes in Equatorial Guinea and Uganda. These concerns fuel a narrative problematizing China-Africa links and lead many to hypothesize that the African public's perception of China is at best skeptical (Taylor and Zajontz 2020) and, at worst, hostile.

Using public opinion data, some scholars have found varying patterns across sub-groups and countries in Africans' attitudes toward China. With university-based samples, Sautman and Hairong (2009) report nuanced views of China among both elites and non-elites, as respondents recognized benefits to Chinese engagement in Africa and expressed problems and concerns. Significantly, they found between-country variation in attitudes toward China, which they attribute to explicitly political variables, such as national political discourse that either framed or failed to frame Chinese engagement in Africa as a problem. In countries such as Zambia, politicians like Michael Sata have attempted to win electoral support by promoting populist narratives that depict China as a new face of colonialism (Hess and Aidoo 2014; Matambo 2019). Where these narratives have germinated, perceptions of China have been less favorable (Negi 2008).

Other scholars have attempted to untangle the specific effects of economic and political variables on African attitudes toward China. Using Afrobarometer survey data and multi-level regressions, Hanusch (2012) explores the impact of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows and trade balances with China on Africans' attitudes. He finds that while higher levels of FDI have little impact on African attitudes toward the Chinese, greater trade imbalances dampen views of China, which implies that Africans may believe the benefits of cheaper consumer goods may not outweigh damage to local producers and economies from increased competition with inexpensive Chinese products. At the individual level, Hanusch found little correlation between respondents' views of democracy and their opinions on China; however, he did observe that those who prioritize economic and social rights held more favorable views of Chinese engagement in their countries, which suggests that some Africans may look to China as a potential partner in poverty alleviation. Similar evidence comes from Ishiyama (2023) and Morgan (2019), who emphasize that economic explanations at the individual and country-level are more predictive of Africans' evaluation of China than are ideological factors.

More evidence for the economic roots of Africans' attitudes toward China comes from studies analyzing respondents' direct exposure to Chinese firms, aid, or investment projects. Recent work uses geo-coded survey data along with geo-referenced aid and investment data to explore the link between exposure to Chinese projects and favorable attitudes. Xu and Zhang (2020) find that living near a Chinese aid project prompted more positive views of China, although there were significant differences in local attitudes based on the type of aid project and the socioeconomic status of respondents. Overall, economically and politically advantaged groups tend to look more favorably on Chinese aid, but disadvantaged groups supported Chinese social infrastructure projects like hospitals, sanitation, and water supply as it "meets their needs for public services" (Xu and Zhang 2020, 328). Using similar methods, McCauley, Pearson,

and Wang (2022) investigate how proximity to Chinese infrastructure projects impact attitudes on the Chinese development model. They, too, find differential effects implying that African attitudes toward China are nuanced and complex. In general, living close to a Chinese investment project reduced support for a uniquely Chinese model of development. However, project type seemed to mediate views, as respondents living near manufacturing sites held more positive views of Chinese influence than those living close to resource-related projects. The latter group expressed concerns about the potential for land grabs or job loss with increased Chinese investment in their home regions. Similar evidence — that is, no clear positive impact of Chinese-funded projects on China's soft power among local residents — also comes from Blair, Marty, and Roessler (2022), who relied on geo-coded aid data as well. Interestingly, Atitianti and Asiamah (2023) found that proximity to a Chinese aid project was associated with negative perceptions of domestic government competency, perhaps because respondents perceive aid as fueling local corruption. Taken together, these studies suggest that attitudes toward China's engagement in Africa may be shaped by the impact of Chinese activities on Africans' daily lives or their own perceptions of public goods provision and governance in general.

But these studies also imply that the benefits of Chinese activity in Africa are not distributed equally, and, therefore, we are likely to observe variation in views of China across different individuals and groups. Thus far, scholars have teased out how different socioeconomic variables — such as employment, education, or skill-level — impact respondents' favorability toward China (Hanusch 2012; Larue 2019) and have asked whether support for democracy and human rights correlates with positive views on China. However, the differential impacts of gender on these views have been underexplored in the literature. While both Hanusch (2012) and Sautman and Hairong (2009) record a statistically significant gender difference on support for Chinese engagement on the continent (with females offering less support), the finding is left unexplored. This gender gap in the perception of Chinese engagement is important for the reasons we spelled out earlier: under descriptive representation and under other channels of influence for African women, a gap in attitudes can have important policy effects. Explaining this gap in preferences also may help shed light on a long-standing debate in political economy research on gender and attitudes toward globalization and trade. The next section explores this link in more detail, first by leveraging work on gender gaps in policy preferences.

## A Gender Gap in Attitudes

That women hold different views on policy issues than men in Africa has been well documented. Wantchekon's seminal 2003 work found that because women are typically "excluded from the most common forms of redistribution" across the continent, they are more responsive than men to electoral platforms that emphasize public goods such as public health and education reform (Wantchekon 2003). More recently, Gottlieb, Grossman, and Robinson (2018) identified a measurable gender gap in policy prioritization within 10 different

policy domains across 27 African countries. They suggest that social vulnerability is the most significant driver of the gender gap at the individual level, as women who were financially dependent on a spouse or extended family were more likely to prioritize access to clean water (a policy area typically preferred by women) than infrastructural investment (a policy area typically prioritized by men). Clayton et al. (2019) found a similar gender gap — both among citizens and legislators — in policy prioritization across Sub-Saharan Africa. While men in their sample prioritized infrastructure, women were more likely to prioritize poverty reduction, health care, and women's rights. Such findings imply that African men may look more favorably toward China than women simply because they value infrastructural goods, and China has expended more in high-profile, infrastructural mega-projects than in poverty alleviation programs across Africa (Brautigam 2009).

While these studies illuminate African women's views on domestic policy arenas, international political economy research in the US offers some explanations for gender gaps in preferences toward international economic processes, foremost international trade. Mansfield, Mutz, and Silver (2015) present evidence that core values on competition, isolationism, and risk aversion explain why females are more opposed to free trade than men, rather than straightforward economic self-interest or economic knowledge. Guisinger (2016) and Brutger and Guisinger (2022) also suggest that risk aversion and vulnerability explain female opposition to free trade. In the context of FDI as another type of foreign economic engagement, Lee and Shin (2020) suggest a different dynamic, whereby women view FDI as potentially empowering, depending on their individual position in the economy. For the role of China in Africa, these studies imply that gender gaps in attitudes on economic issues (1) are widespread and (2) can be driven by multiple, possibly competing sources of how women and men evaluate economic policies and economic actors. For this study, this extends to the role of China as a political-economic presence in Africa.

Despite their differences, each of these studies locate a common explanation for why men and women might diverge in their policy preferences: economic interest. Leveraging this work, we too suggest there is an economic logic that explains a gender gap in attitudes toward China in Africa, one rooted in the differing economic positions of men and women on the continent and the realities of women's economic vulnerability. We argue that women experiencing economic insecurity may look less favorably on the influence of China in Africa than men because their relative vulnerability leads to heightened concerns about Chinese competition among women in the informal sector and concerns about exploitation and discrimination among women working in Chinese firms. However, we suspect that the gender gap in attitudes toward China will dissipate among men and women with higher levels of education and financial security.

### **The Economic Lives of Women in Africa**

Scholars have widely documented the towering obstacles to economic security that many women face throughout Africa, which leads us to focus on economic

vulnerability and security as a key factor in understanding gender gaps in attitudes toward China in Africa. Women on the continent are much less likely to be employed in the formal sector than men, and as such, work disproportionately in the informal sector, or other forms of precarious employment (Bonnet, Vanek, and Chen 2019). Overall, labor market participation rates differ between men and women in Africa by over 10 percentage points (International Labour Organization 2023). Where women are employed in the formal sector, they face significant disadvantages in earnings, as women are overrepresented in low-wage, low-skilled jobs on the continent (Arbache, Kolev, and Filipiak 2010). Moreover, patriarchal cultural norms often oblige women to take on a preponderance of household and care duties, leaving little time for skill development and job training (for an overview of related findings, see Marcus 2018). Despite this, studies have shown that education tends to increase earnings for women in Africa (Branson and Leibbrandt 2013). However, women are less able to access education than men in many African countries, as families facing acute or prolonged economic hardship often deprioritize girls' education (see, e.g., Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah 2013).

Examining women's economic participation by sector, we observe that women are underrepresented in the industry and the service sectors (Arbache, Kolev, and Filipiak 2010, 41). Opportunities for women in civil service jobs have precipitously declined because of structural adjustments programs that have reduced the size of the public sector (Olowu 1999; Sadasivam 1997). While employment opportunities in the private sector have improved in the last decades across Africa, most women find jobs in low-wage sectors. Most noticeably, women are overrepresented in the agricultural sector in Africa, where many work as subsistence farmers or produce highly perishable goods for local markets. Men, by contrast, are more likely to work in industrial farms across the continent. Dependence on agricultural work creates challenges for African women, who operate in legal systems that afford them weaker property rights; as a result, women tend to have more tenuous access to land. Given the realities of underemployment, unemployment, informal work, and low earnings among African women, scholars have identified a "feminization of poverty" (Randriamaro 2008, 2) in Africa, which becomes apparent when we look at data. For example, women comprise about two-thirds of the chronically hungry in Sub-Saharan Africa, even as they serve as the managers of household food security.

It is the economic lives of women in Africa which leads us to expect that women may hold more skeptical views of the overall benefits of the Chinese presence in Africa, in comparison to men. We pinpoint economic insecurity as a key factor explaining a gender gap in attitudes toward China in Africa. For women working in the informal sector — especially those who rely on subsistence agriculture and market production for income generation — Chinese engagement in Africa brings fears of competition in the marketplace. Since the 1990s, when government programs in China encouraged export businesses to expand in Africa, Chinese traders have set up small shops and market stalls across Africa's cities and rural villages. Selling "traditional medicine, hair pieces, embroidered fabrics, and other Chinese goods" (Brautigam 2009), these traders



compete with African sellers — many of whom are women — who find themselves unable to match the low prices offered by Chinese merchants. This has troubled many local sellers who object to Chinese traders on the grounds that they upend local trading customs and, presumably, underprice goods that are subsidized by the Chinese government. One article describes how, in the markets of Kampala in 2017, Ugandan merchants held up placards that read “Leave our Markets” as they marched to municipal offices to demand their government restrict Chinese competition.<sup>2</sup>

Women traders will likely perceive a greater threat from Chinese small-scale merchants than men. For one, women are overrepresented in informal trading in Africa, and, therefore, bear a stronger burden of external competition; by some estimates, women make up over 70% of the informal cross border trade in Sub-Saharan Africa, and over 80% in the Great Lakes region (Livani and Solotaroff 2019). Moreover, research suggests that the money women earn from trading is their main source of income and is mainly used for family expenses, while men often find additional revenue streams (UN Women 2010). As such, the out-sized reliance of women on trade compared to men is one potential reason why women might be more skeptical of Chinese engagement in Africa than men.

Competition from Chinese traders is also particularly problematic for women in the agricultural sector in Africa. According to Randriamaro (2008, 7), women are major food producers in Sub-Saharan Africa, so they are particularly “vulnerable to volatility in food prices, in addition to their displacement from their share of local markets by imports of cheaper food products from international and regional sources.” Moreover, Chinese expansion in African agribusiness — and the large-scale production of cash crops — has sparked fears of Chinese “land grabs” among subsistence farmers and smallholders (Brautigam 2009). Given the gendered dimensions of land inequalities on the continent, African women are particularly vulnerable to displacement. We expect that women working in, or reliant on, the agricultural sector will display less favorable views toward Chinese influence as they perceive a threat to their economic security from Chinese competition in agricultural products and Chinese investment in African land.

Undoubtedly, male merchants in Africa face the same vulnerabilities that come with increased Chinese competition in the marketplace. However, male traders are less hindered by the kinds of headwinds that females typically encounter. For instance, women that earn income from the informal trade of goods find it difficult to enter the lucrative trade sector because they lack assets to increase productivity or the needed collateral that land ownership ordinarily provides men. Therefore, women stay in the informal sector longer than men do, finding it difficult to “break into” formal employment (Akpan and Cascant-Sempere 2022). Livani and Solotaroff (2019, 10) explain that “because men and women do not have equal access to education, productive resources, transport, networks and other factors that affect economic activity, their ability to seize trade-related opportunities differ.” Overå’s (2017) study of informal traders in Ghana documents the advantages availed to male traders because they typically have access to greater amounts of capital than women, which means they are able to diversify their activities and income streams. Moreover, men are less



likely to be burdened by care responsibilities, which makes them able to work longer hours for greater profit than women. As Chinese street merchants crowd out space in markets across the continent, informal traders, regardless of gender, are feeling the pressure of rising competition. This suggests that the attitudes of male traders will also be shaped by their own economic vulnerabilities. However, it is likely that women will feel the effects of Chinese competition more acutely because of the structural disadvantages they face. The gendered differences in resilience to trade-based instability should result in a gender gap in perceptions of the benefits of Chinese engagement in Africa.

While Chinese competition may increase the vulnerability of women in the informal trade and agricultural sectors, formal employment in Chinese firms brings its own challenges to women's economic security in Africa. Because of inequalities in education and skill acquisition, women in Africa tend to be employed in low-skilled, low-wage positions, including in Chinese-owned firms within Export Processing Zones (EPZ) or Special Economic Zones (SEZ). According to many accounts, it is in these types of firms that African women have faced exploitative, even dangerous, working conditions. In Chinese-owned garment factories across Africa, for instance, the average worker profile is a young, single, female, who is best "suited for quick, labour intensive work" (Opondo 2009, 8). Reports have documented violations of labor rights in many Chinese firms, including forced labor, subsistence wages, excessive working hours, sex discrimination, intimidation, and collective bargaining suppression (e.g., Gadzala 2010; Human Rights Watch 2011). Women have also disclosed widespread sexual harassment from Chinese supervisors. These harsh conditions not only impact the health and well-being of women workers, but they can also lead to net income loss, increasing the risk of economic insecurity. In an ethnographic study of a Chinese garment factory in New Castle, South Africa, Liang Xu documents a "collective goal system" in which Zulu women workers — viewed through a gendered and racial lens as "unproductive" yet malleable laborers — were subject to pay deductions for failing to meet their daily target production goals (Xu 2022, 367).

Even as women are overrepresented in Chinese EPZs throughout Africa, men considerably outnumber women in industries like construction, restaurant, and hospitality, contributing to a measurable gender employment gap. Interviews with managers of Chinese construction firms have revealed that many companies prefer male labor, since they perceive men to be more likely to have the technical skills and physical strength for the jobs. Discrimination against women, however, plays a role in this employment gap. Women are perceived to be less reliable workers because their household duties put additional burdens on their time or because of the possibility that a female worker will become pregnant and be unable to work. Moreover, where women are employed in these industries, their pay is conspicuously lower. A report from a Chinese construction company in Kenya revealed that women are paid 15% less than men for the same unskilled labor.<sup>3</sup>

Given these noted employment and pay gaps, as well as reports of harsh working conditions in large, highly visible Chinese-owned or affiliated companies, it is likely that economically vulnerable women will view the Chinese presence in Africa more negatively than men. Women's attitudes toward China may be impacted by a fear of or experience with exploitation in Chinese

owned-firms. Because women dominate the workforce in Chinese-owned and operated factories in EPZs, men may be less likely to fear this type of exploitation. Moreover, just as women recognize the expanding pool of jobs that China's activity in Africa has provided, poor women may feel that their lack of skill and education will put them out of reach of the most lucrative opportunities in Chinese firms. Because they face gender-specific barriers in labor and employment, poor women in Africa may not view China as a boon of opportunity in the same way men do.

Less economically vulnerable women, however, may look more favorably on the Chinese presence in Africa. While women in Sub-Saharan Africa are susceptible to extreme poverty because of the burdens of domestic care, insufficient assets, lower earnings, and part-time work, prior studies suggest that asset ownership — including education and material assets — can mitigate these vulnerabilities. A large literature in development research has considered how asset ownership mitigates economic risk (see, e.g., Alwang, Siegel, and Jørgensen 2001; Bebbington 1999; Échevin 2013; Moser 1998; Rakodi 1999; Siegel and Alwang 1999). For women as for men in Africa, enhancing assets via attaining higher levels of education increases earnings and decreases the incidence of low-paying jobs or underemployment (Arbache, Kolev, and Filipiak 2010). Moreover, as levels of education increase, disparities in wage levels between males and females decrease, suggesting that education favorably affects gender wage equity (Arbache, Kolev, and Filipiak 2010). If education alleviates insecurity and promotes wage equity, it may also impact how women perceive the opportunities that China brings to the continent, and we may begin to see a convergence of attitudes across genders.

Women with higher levels of education could view the growth of Chinese firms operating in African countries as providing avenues of opportunity. Many skilled workers in Africa have found employment in the continent's rapidly expanding information communications and technologies sector (Nchake and Shuaibu 2022). Chinese companies have contributed significantly to the growth of this industry, as a part of China's Digital Silk Road Initiative — a multi-pronged effort to aid governments in the building of their telecommunications network infrastructure. As companies like Huawei establish training centers from Kenya to South Africa and prioritize the localization of talent, African workers have gained skills in engineering and project management as well as expanded job prospects (Tsui 2016). If women with secondary and tertiary education in Africa enjoy higher earnings prospects, they may recognize a benefit to the overall expansion of job opportunities that Chinese companies like Huawei provide on the continent. For these reasons, we suspect that the gender gap in attitudes toward China will decrease with rising levels of education among respondents.

Similarly, material asset ownership should also insulate individuals from vulnerabilities connected to trade competition and poor working conditions. Owning or having access to physical assets such as cell phones, means of transportation, or other tools can expand opportunities, especially for women facing the aforementioned gender-specific barriers (Burrell 2014; Morawczynski 2009). For instance, cell phones allow for more efficient participation in economic exchange by using mobile payments and getting faster access to

information. Especially when multiple assets are combined, women face fewer burdens of acute economic insecurity. As a result, women with higher levels of asset ownership would feel less vulnerable to exploitation or economic loss coming from Chinese firms or Chinese competitors. This may, in turn, mollify negative views of the Chinese presence in Africa. As such, we expect a narrowing gender gap among respondents that own more material assets.

## Hypotheses

Our theoretical framework centers on how economic vulnerabilities of women in Africa drive a gender gap in the perception of Chinese engagement on the continent. In line with prior work and arguments about how women, in particular, experience competition as a result of Chinese engagement, we expect that:

- Women perceive the influence of China on their country less positively than men. (H1)

Second, we expect to see more negative perceptions of China among women that are economically vulnerable compared to men. However, our theory suggests that these differences disappear among women and men who are less vulnerable and more economically secure. In hypothesis form, this suggests the following pattern:

- Women perceive the influence of China on their country less positively than men, but this gender gap disappears among women and men who are economically more secure. (H2)

We use two specific indicators for economic security, both based on individuals' assets: education and ownership of material assets, which we explain in more detail below. Our argument also lets us focus specifically on the sectors where a negative impact of competition driven by Chinese engagement might materialize: agriculture and trade.

- Women perceive the influence of China on their country less positively than men, and this gender gap is more pronounced among those working in agriculture than in other sectors. (H3a)
- Women perceive the influence of China on their country less positively than men, and this gender gap is more pronounced among those working in trade/retail than in other sectors. (H3b)

## Empirical Strategy

We use individual-level survey data from up to 37 African countries to test our hypotheses. Waves seven and eight of the Afrobarometer project (Afrobarometer 2017; 2023) each contain an identical survey question on the perceived role of

China for respondents' country of residence, asking whether respondents think that the economic and political influence of China is mostly positive or negative. This question has been used in other research on Africans' perception of China and serves well to capture the key concept of interest for our study: how do Africans assess the influence of China?

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual survey respondent so that we can track the role of economic vulnerability and other characteristics for respondents' perception for China. Across 37 countries and two survey waves (2016 and 2022), we cover between 74,692 and 84,229 respondents (depending on model specification) that provided information on key variables.

## Variables

The outcome variable is respondents' perception of China on a five-point scale. Within and between countries, respondents' views vary considerably. Since this study explores a gender gap in this variable, we rely on a binary indicator of respondents' gender to (a) estimate the gender gap and (b) probe whether the gap declines with lower economic vulnerability. The Afrobarometer codes respondents' gender as a variable with two possible values: male or female.

### *Economic Vulnerability and Security*

Our argument centers on economic vulnerability driving a worse perception of China among African women compared to men. Following our argument, vulnerability is high among those employed in informal sectors, especially those exposed to trade competition. Vulnerability is high in the agricultural sector, where competition with large-scale farming or Chinese companies might induce volatility. Workers in lower-skilled positions are more likely to be employed by Chinese-owned firms and possibly exposed to precarious working conditions they might associate with China. We capture all these dynamics by focusing on two asset-based measures of vulnerability that are appropriate for low- and middle-income economies: education and ownership of material assets. A large literature has used education as an asset that proxies for skills, which in turn reduce labor market vulnerability because individuals with more education are subject to less domestic competition and are less likely to see their jobs moved abroad (e.g., Scheve and Slaughter 2001). This is also the case in lower- and middle-income economies (Harris et al. 2018). For our argument, we assume that higher educational achievement increases economic security and reduces vulnerability because those with more education are more likely to work in, or have access to, sectors where Chinese engagement is not associated with competition or volatility. We use Afrobarometer's nine-point scale from no formal schooling to post-graduate degrees to create this measure. Second, we use an index of ownership of material items (such as radios, TVs, cell phones, and cars), a common indicator for asset-based household wealth (Filmer and Pritchett 2001; Howe et al. 2012), as a measure for economic security. Here, our logic is that those with more material wealth are better insured against volatility simply

due to their economic status. Lastly, to address H3a and H3b on specific employment sectors, we use binary indicators for respondents working in the agricultural and trade/retail sectors compared to all other sectors.

### **Other Correlates of African Attitudes Toward China**

Based on literature on attitudes toward globalization, trade, and the presence of foreign countries, our analyses incorporate several attitudinal and demographic variables. We capture anti-trade attitudes and opposition to foreign engagement with variables measuring opposition to free trade and open borders, and opposition to immigrants as neighbors, respectively. To account for respondents' political disposition that might affect their views of China, we include a binary variable indicating respondents' rejection of non-democratic forms of government, asking them whether they find democracy preferable to any other form of government. Standard demographic controls that may capture exposure to Chinese presence include age and urban residence. As another indicator of short-term vulnerability, we also include employment status.

### **Country-Level Characteristics**

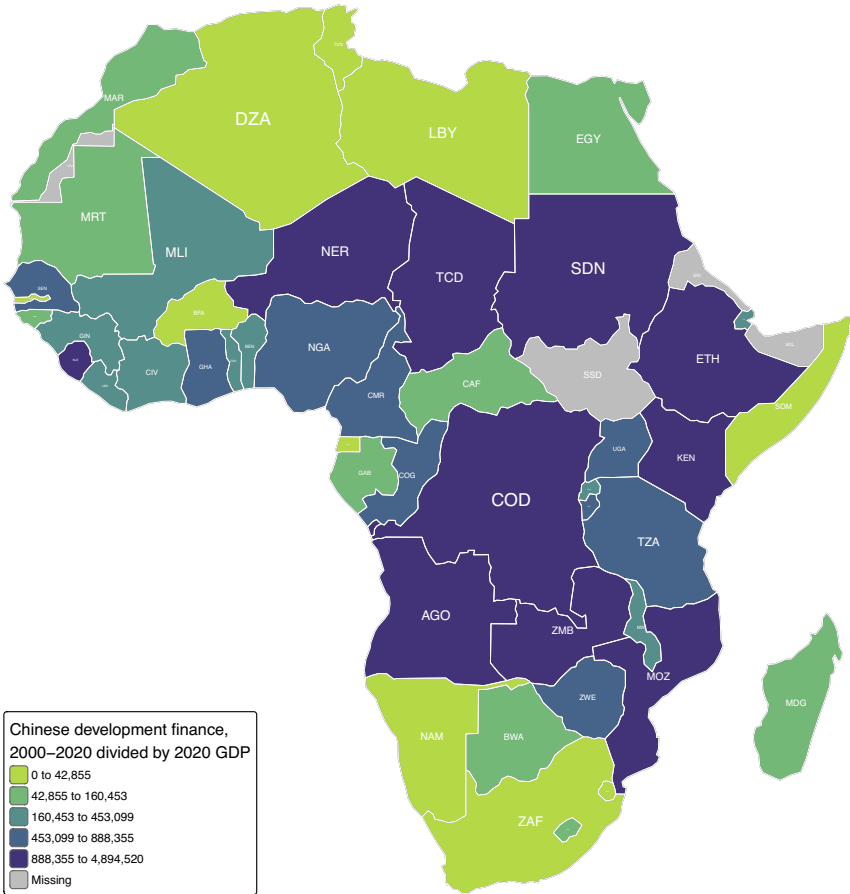
With survey respondents from 37 countries, we model between-country differences by including country-level characteristics. Multiple studies on the role of China in Africa posit that the volume of Chinese engagement may drive Africans' attitudes. A common measure that we also use tracks the volume of Chinese development finance as a ratio of a country's GDP, where higher values will correlate with a more visible Chinese presence (see Figure 1). We incorporate countries' wealth to differentiate between lower- and middle-income economies, as well as binary indicators for former British and French colonies to capture longer-term relations with those countries. The political context of each respondent's country is measured with the polyarchy index generated by the Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge et al. 2024). Lastly, we account for the average economic vulnerability of females in each country by constructing a country median measure of female education, based on Afrobarometer data for the respective country in the given year, similar to Gottlieb, Grossman, and Robinson (2018). All variables are summarized in Tables A1 and A2.

### **Method**

Given the structure of the data, we use multilevel regression estimates to uncover evidence on the gender gap in attitudes on China and the sources of this gap. We estimate these regressions in the following forms. First, for H1 on the gender gap, we estimate:

$$\text{ChinaPositive}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{01}\text{Female}_i + \beta_{0k}\mathbf{X}_i + r_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where  $\beta_{01}$  estimates the gender gap,  $\mathbf{X}$  represents other explanatory variables at the individual level  $i$ ,  $r_{ij}$  represents the error term at the individual level,



**Figure 1.** Chinese development finance in Africa, in relative volume (stronger shading indicates higher financial flows, relative to the recipient country's GDP).

and  $\beta_{0j}$  is a varying intercept for each country  $j$  composed of country-level covariates:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \beta_{0j} = & \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Chinese development aid}_j \\
 & + \gamma_{02}\text{GDP per capita}_j \\
 & + \gamma_{03}\text{Median female education}_j \\
 & + \gamma_{04}\text{Democracy}_j \\
 & + \gamma_{05}\text{Former colony}_j \\
 & + u_j
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{2}$$

For H2 and H3, we introduce interaction terms into [equation \(1\)](#) so that the individual-level part of the model is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ChinaPositive}_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} + \beta_{01}\text{Female}_i + \beta_{02}\text{Vulnerability}_i \\ & + \beta_{03}\text{Female}_i \times \text{Vulnerability}_i \\ & + \beta_{0k}\mathbf{X}_i + r_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

Our theory implies that a gender gap will materialize in a negative estimate for  $\beta_{01}$ , the coefficient on female respondents in [equation \(1\)](#). Turning toward economic vulnerability, H2 and H3 imply that highly vulnerable females hold a more negative view of China than highly vulnerable males, but this gap disappears as vulnerability declines. In these regressions, we show the estimated slope for female respondents conditional on vulnerability and expect this slope to be negative (indicating a gender gap) at high levels of vulnerability, but indistinguishable from 0 at low levels of vulnerability.

Prior literature leads us to expect modest effect sizes that are nevertheless meaningful in substantive terms. For instance, estimates for the gender gap in the perception of Chinese engagement in Latin America typically hover around a few percentage points using Latinobarometro data. As another example, in their study on foreign direct investment, Lee and Shin (2020) find a gender gap of a few percentage points using a global Pew survey. Such differences can be politically significant if projected onto election results or a critical mass of citizens influencing policy.

### Findings at the Individual Level

Consistent with other work and with H1, our initial analysis shows a gender gap in how Africans perceive the influence of China on their respective country. In [Table 1](#), we find that women view China's influence more negatively than men at a statistically significant level, and at a level comparable to other studies. We find the same result regardless of whether the model includes predictors that might themselves be affected by gender, such as education, urban/rural area of residence, or economic security. This gender difference also persists holding constant other correlates of attitudes toward China, while also modeling between-country differences. In other words, accounting for common possible sources of how Africans view the role of China does not remove the gender gap in attitudes. The persistence of the gender gap motivates the main analyses of this study, to which we turn next.

If economic vulnerability drives a more negative perception of China among women compared to men, we expect that a difference in attitudes will only materialize among respondents who are more vulnerable, and that the difference will reduce or disappear among respondents who are more economically secure (H2). The data show that this is indeed the case. When using education as a proxy for economic security, the left panel of [Figure 2](#) illustrates a negative difference between female & male respondents at lower levels of education:



**Table 1.** Multilevel estimates of responses to “Do you think that the economic and political influence of China on your country is mostly negative (1) or positive (5)?”

	Minimal controls	Attitude controls	Full controls
Intercept	4.7* (0.5)	3.9* (0.5)	3.9* (0.5)
<b>Individual-level covariates</b>			
Female	-0.039* (0.008)	-0.036* (0.008)	-0.034* (0.009)
Age	-0.002 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.013 (0.009)
Education			-0.03* (0.01)
Urban			-0.037* (0.009)
Ownership of items (count)			0.04* (0.01)
Employed			0.020* (0.009)
Prefer democracy to other types of gov't		0.09* (0.01)	0.09* (0.01)
Oppose free trade and open borders		-0.114* (0.009)	-0.114* (0.009)
Approve immigrants as neighbors		0.042* (0.004)	0.042* (0.004)
<b>Country-level covariates</b>			
Chinese development finance / GDP	-1.2* (0.5)	-0.5 (0.6)	-0.4 (0.6)
GDP per capita (logged)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Female education (country median)	-0.07* (0.01)	-0.06* (0.01)	-0.06* (0.01)
Democracy	-0.8* (0.1)	-0.7* (0.1)	-0.7* (0.1)

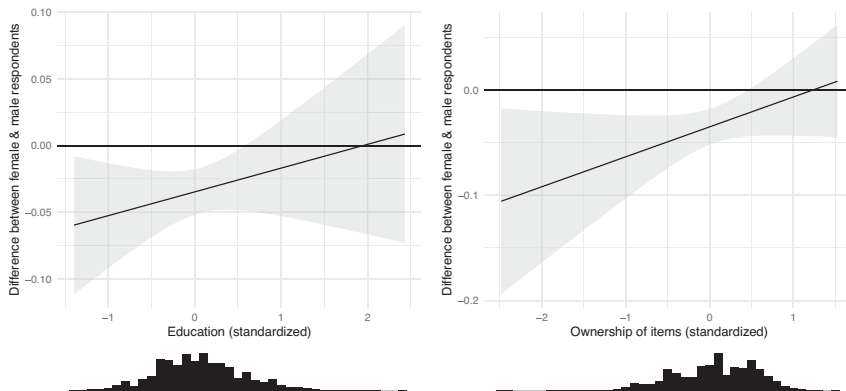
*(Continued)*

Table 1. Continued

	Minimal controls	Attitude controls	Full controls
Former British colony	−0.3 (0.2)	−0.3 (0.2)	−0.3 (0.2)
Former French colony	−0.4 (0.2)	−0.3 (0.2)	−0.3 (0.2)
Observations	84229	75511	74692
AIC	262815.9	235360.2	232718.8
BIC	262928.0	235498.7	232894.0

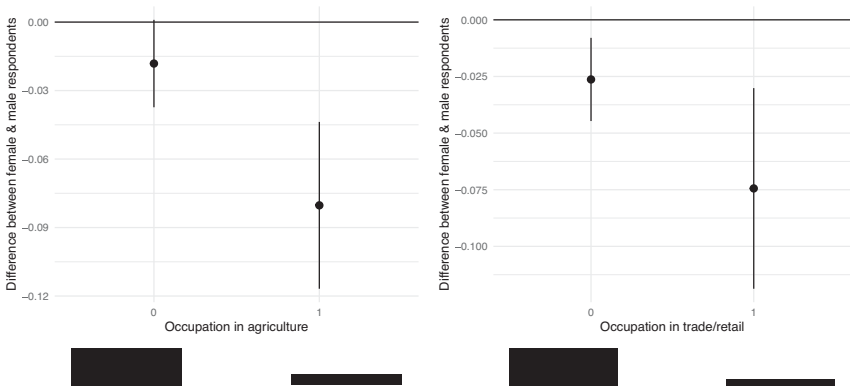
Note: Estimates from multilevel model with varying intercepts for countries and survey waves.

\* $p < 0.05$



**Figure 2.** Interactions with measures of long-term economic vulnerability show that the gender gap in views of China disappears for respondents who are less economically vulnerable, measured by educational attainment (left panel) and ownership of material items (right panel). Black lines and ribbons show the conditional regression coefficient of the “female” variable and 95% confidence intervals. Histograms below show the distribution of the respective vulnerability variable. Estimates are based on the first two columns in Table A3.

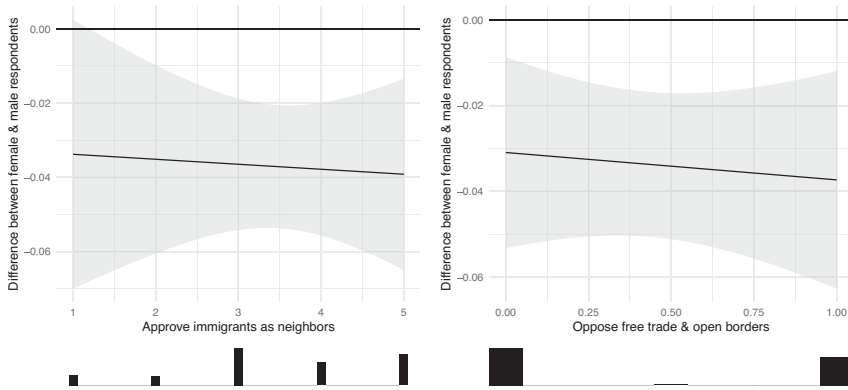
among the economically vulnerable, women are less likely to view China’s role as positive than are men. This difference, however, evaporates for those with high educational achievement (and less vulnerable), where the gender gap becomes statistically indistinguishable from 0. The same result appears when we conceptualize economic vulnerability through the ownership of material items: among those who own few items (more vulnerable), women are more skeptical of China. For those owning more items (less vulnerable), this gender gap disappears. This finding is consistent with H2 and offers strong evidence that economic vulnerability drives the difference between how African women and men evaluate the benefits China brings for their country.



**Figure 3.** Interactions with employment sectors show that the gender gap is higher in agriculture (left panel), a sector that is likely more economically vulnerable to Chinese economic engagement. The difference in the gender gap across trade/retail and other sectors (right panel) is similar, though less pronounced. Dots and whiskers show the conditional regression coefficient of the “female” variable and 95% confidence intervals. Bars below show the distribution of respondents among the sectors. Estimates based on the second two columns in Table A3.

Our theory highlights the vulnerability of some sectors in particular: women working in the agriculture and informal trade sectors might be particularly likely to associate Chinese influence with volatility and threats to their economic livelihood. Figure 3 is mostly consistent with the hypothesis implied by this logic. The left panel shows that among Africans working in agriculture, women hold substantially less positive views of China’s role than men. Among all others (i.e., those working in other sectors or not employed), the difference between the genders is cut into a third and its confidence interval crosses 0. For respondents working in trade and retail, the data show a similar but smaller pattern, and the confidence intervals overlap slightly. This smaller difference is likely because the indicator for those working in trade and retail combines respondents working in informal trade — to whom our argument most closely applies — and those working in more formal trade sectors, who might benefit economically from Chinese engagement, and therefore less likely to harbor negative views.

A common concern in the literature on material drivers of attitudes is that measures of economic security, as we use them here, might inform individuals’ core values, which then shape views on specific issues such as China’s role. Here, one might speculate that respondents with more formal education may have been exposed to information about the economic benefits of Chinese economic engagement, might be more open to foreign economic actors, or hold more positive views of other countries in general. We address this by interacting these attitudinal variables with gender. If education proxies for attitudes rather than economic security (or both), we expect the gender gap to disappear with more open attitudes because any value-based opposition to China would disappear as core values become more open. In that case, the results should look similar to those in Figure 3. However, our analyses in Figure 4 suggest that this is not the



**Figure 4.** Interactions with core value indicators on immigrants, and free trade & open borders show that the gender gap persists across views and is not driven by education changing attitudes. Histograms below show the distribution of the respective value indicator. Estimates based on Table A4.

case. African women in the sample hold more negative attitudes of China than men, regardless of their core values on immigrants or trade and borders. This is consistent with our study's main proposition that gender-specific economic vulnerability, rather than cultural or political values, drives attitudes toward Chinese economic and political engagement.

### Explaining Between-Country Differences

The findings reported so far help explain the gender gap at the individual level. However, Afrobarometer data also show striking variation of the gender gap in attitudes to China *between* African countries: in some countries, women on average are much more skeptical of Chinese economic and political engagement than men; in others, the difference is smaller and in a few it even reverts so that women hold more positive views of China. Figure 5 shows these differences clearly and highlights that even neighboring countries such as Kenya and Uganda exhibit differing gender gaps.

Our theory of economic vulnerability also generalizes to between-country differences: if women are more economically vulnerable, they harbor more concerns about Chinese engagement. In societies where, on average, women are more economically secure, the gender gap should be less pronounced. While individual women with higher vulnerability would still be more pessimistic about China's role than men in similar positions, higher economic security for women on average should reduce the proportion of women falling in the aforementioned category. As a result, in those countries the gender gap in perceptions of China should shrink or even revert — in those cases where women's economic security pushes women into spaces where they may benefit from Chinese economic engagement rather than fear volatility, exploitation, or economic loss.

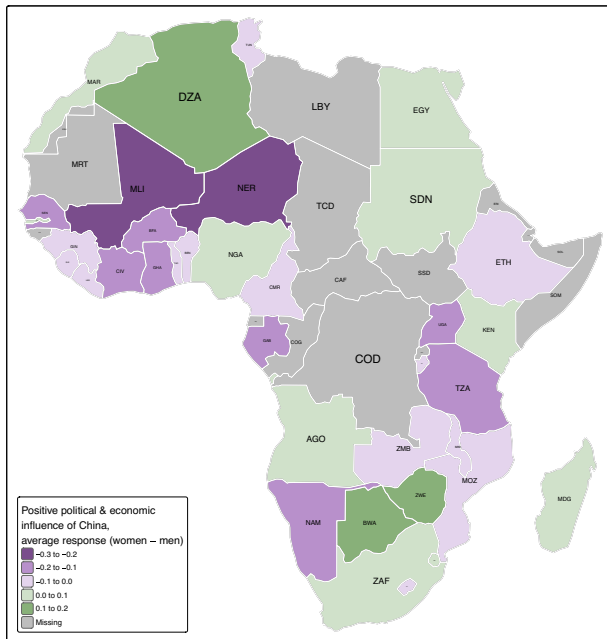
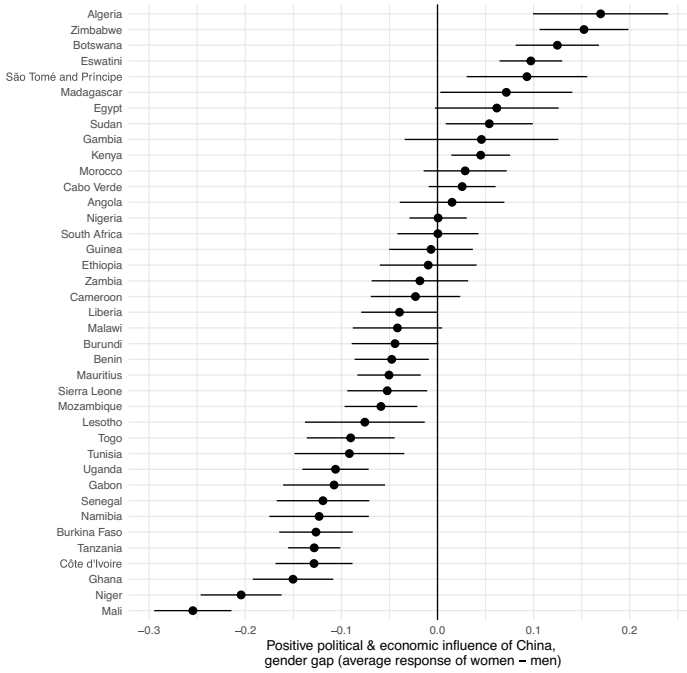
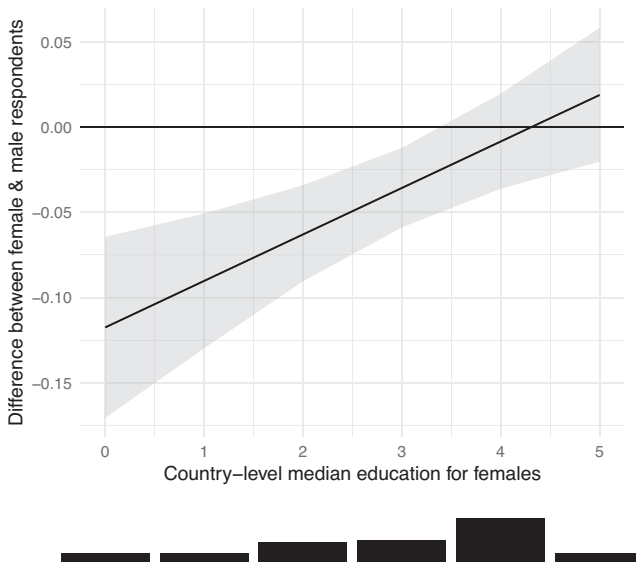


Figure 5. Country-level gender gaps in Africans' perception of Chinese engagement in Africa.



**Figure 6.** Evidence on between-country differences: the gender gap disappears in societies where (on average) women are less economically vulnerable, as measured by median female education. Bars show the distribution of median female education at the country level. Results based on [Table A5](#).

We explore this implication through a cross-level interaction term between individual gender and median female educational achievement at the country level. If the argument holds, the conditional coefficient on gender should be negative at low values of country-level female education and shrink toward 0 as female education increases. [Figure 6](#) shows precisely this pattern. Women are more skeptical than men toward China in societies with lower female education, but this difference disappears in societies with comparatively high median educational attainment of women. This finding, in connection with the individual-level results at the center of this study, supports the larger idea that Africans perceive the impact of Chinese economic and political engagement through a lens of economic vulnerability and security.

### Additional Results

In all regressions, control variables are consistent with expectations from the literature and with the broader implications of our argument. Those that are employed are more welcoming of Chinese engagement, a finding that is consistent with our emphasis on economic security. Urban residents are more skeptical of China, which could hint at increased interaction with Chinese merchants and would be in line with findings in [Hanusch \(2012\)](#) and [Morgan \(2019\)](#) that import competition leads to less favorable perceptions, but poverty alleviation increases favorable views. The patterns of Chinese engagement across rural and urban

areas might align with that pattern. Our research design, though, is not able to trace this specific dynamic, unlike work that focused on precisely geolocated Chinese projects (Blair, Marty, and Roessler 2022). Cultural and political values predict specific attitudes toward China as the literature would suggest: those who oppose trade and open borders view China less positively; those who approve of immigrants as neighbors view China more positively; those who prefer democracy also view China more positively, consistent with more tolerant views overall being associated with positive views of China.

At the country-level, we observe a negative relationship between Chinese presence (measured as Chinese development finance divided by GDP) and views of China. While this finding is noisy, with a confidence interval close to crossing 0, it is consistent with some of the findings in Blair, Marty, and Roessler (2022) and Ishiyama (2023) that Chinese aid may lead to less positive views of China. In countries with higher average female education, the gender gap shrinks; this is consistent with our argument, as higher average female education suggests lower economic vulnerability among women. At the same time, average views of men regarding China tended to be less positive in countries with higher female education. This, too, is consistent with our argument, as higher average female education increases labor supply and might increase competitiveness on the labor market. Political context, measured as democracy, matters too: on average, respondents in more democratic countries express less positive views of Chinese influence on their country.

All main results are based on linear models treating the outcome, a five-point ordered response scale, as continuous. We obtain substantively similar results from multilevel ordered logit models, as well as logit models that treat views on China as a binary positive/negative variable. Focusing on within-country gender gaps only with country fixed effects returns the same results for the core findings, as do estimates with fixed effects for one of the survey waves. As an alternative approach to studying within-country gender gaps and between-country differences in these gaps, a random effects within-between estimator also yields similar results: at the individual level, the gender gap is mitigated by economic security; at the country level, female education decreases the gender gap. None of the estimates in the study were affected by multicollinearity.<sup>4</sup>

### Qualitative Evidence and the Case of Lesotho

In addition to the general patterns identified in quantitative survey data — which are consistent with our political economy explanation of African attitudes toward China — we also use qualitative evidence to describe the complexity of women's experiences with and attitudes toward the Chinese presence on the continent. As examples of this complexity, we point readers to ethnographic work describing the complicated relationship between Chinese companies, investors, and African workers, traders, and entrepreneurs — such as Khan-Mohammad and Kernen (2023), Sheridan (2022), Siu and McGovern (2017), and Sylvanus (2013), and each of these studies show clearly that



some African women (and women in particular!) benefit from, or take advantage of, new opportunities through Chinese economic involvement. This is precisely the argument in our study: women with lower economic vulnerability, that is, those who are well-positioned to benefit from opportunities through Chinese involvement, are more likely to view China positively in comparison to men in similar positions.

For more specific qualitative evidence illustrating the other side of our argument — why vulnerability drives the gap between women’s and men’s views of China — we turn to Lesotho and summarize the case of women garment factory workers in Chinese-owned firms. In the data we use, Lesotho ranks in the lower third of countries ordered by the gender difference on views of China, suggesting that it is a case where women’s views are considerably more negative than men’s (cf. Figure 4). Lesotho is among the poorest of countries globally, with nearly half of its population living in poverty and nearly 25% in extreme poverty (World Bank 2022). About two-thirds of its population live in rural areas and are dependent on small-scale agricultural production, leaving them particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts and environmental shocks. One can observe considerable economic insecurity among Basotho women, consistent with our argument about higher insecurity driving a larger gender gap. Due to patriarchal norms and discriminatory practices in both the private and public sectors, labor force participation rates are lower for women than men, even as women outpace men in secondary school completion (Gender Group and Development Economics Data Group 2024). In addition, long-term unemployment remains higher for women than men (Chingono 2016, 58), and as such, women are overrepresented in informal trading in Lesotho.

Historically, women in Lesotho have depended on their partners’ employment across the border in the mineral mines of South Africa. But in recent decades, the economic lives of Basotho women have shifted as retrenchment in mines has squeezed the employment prospects of Basotho men (Sun 2017). In the past two decades, female migration within Lesotho has markedly increased, as women are driven from rural villages — by job loss, death, or crop failures — to seek economic opportunities in urban centers. Most of Lesotho’s female migrants are mothers who must replace husbands as breadwinners in order to support their child’s education (Botea, Compennolle, and Chakravarty 2018).

Many have found wage employment in the garment factories of the capital city, Maseru. Since 2000, job growth in export-oriented industries in Lesotho has multiplied, as the United States’ Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) opened up preferential access to US markets for goods from eligible African countries, including Lesotho (Molapo 2014). Garment factories that produce mass-market goods for western countries have appeared in the urban centers of the country; a majority of them are owned by Chinese or Taiwanese firms. Most textile factories employ mainland Chinese as managers and floor supervisors and over 80% of workers in Lesotho’s textile factories are women (Carciotto and Chikohomero 2022).

The harsh working conditions that women experience in Lesotho's garment factories have been widely documented. Some complaints center on environmental concerns and occupational hazard violations, such as poor ventilation, unhygienic restrooms, and freezing factory floor conditions (Sun 2017). Other complaints revolve around labor concerns, such as delayed payment, unwarranted dismissals, forced overtime work and a lack of compensation for such hours, and discriminatory practices against both older and pregnant workers (Molapo 2014). In addition, many workers have documented verbal abuse and threatening behavior used by factory supervisors, most of whom are Chinese, which often escalate when workers fail to meet the output expectations of their managers. Finally, many women have been subject to sexual abuse by supervisors in Lesotho's garment factories. To keep their jobs or receive a promotion, women report, many are coerced into exploitative sexual relationships (Carciotto and Chikohomero 2022).

We hypothesized that poor, and thus more vulnerable, women would be more likely to negatively view China's influence in Africa than men on account of, for one, their experiences of poor working conditions in Chinese-owned factories. Interviews with women in Lesotho's factories suggest that these experiences have contributed to negative views of Chinese firms. Some female workers express discontent with unfair labor practices: "We are being treated by these Chinese factory owners as if we are beggars in our own country...They pay anything they like without respecting the minimum wage in the name of casual work" (Tanga 2009, 114). Others recounted verbal (and at times, physical) abuse: "Chinese managers are using their language which we don't know, they insult us but we know that we have been insulted [...] I know they are insulting us by the look on their face, they show they're angry. They are even mixing their language with Sesotho using insults like 'masepa' [meaning 'excrement' in Sesotho]" (Carciotto and Chikohomero 2022, 34). While the negative views expressed in these interviews may be limited to specific factory supervisors, Tanga (2009) suggests that experiences of hostile work environments have informed a skeptical narrative about the ultimate benefits of Chinese investment to Lesotho, especially as Basotho see Chinese factory owners investing profits in South African banks. One respondent in Tanga's study explains "I don't like the Chinese myself. I know they provide employment but at the disadvantage of the employees. Their impact on the livelihood is very minimal because what the (sic) benefit from this country outweigh the so called impact on poverty" (Tanga 2009, 115).

Indeed some Basotho women suggest that employment in garment factories offers them a necessary lifeline, especially when few other opportunities exist. But many women's experiences highlight that the opportunities opened by Chinese-owned firms do little to provide economic security. As Botea, Compernelle, and Chakravarty (2018, 29) explain, the availability of wage work is often determined by the size of orders, so when jobs are retrenched, "... women stand outside factory gates until they are hired again or work piecemeal jobs to cover costs in the meantime." In this way, Chinese practices often compound poor women's vulnerability rather than mitigate it. As one female worker explained, "We hope that one day, our government and our own business people would be able to employ us some day so that we should not be in perpetual fear of losing

our jobs as we are now. We hope that the newly formed government of His Right Honourable Prime Minister will rescue us from these Chinese harsh working conditions and punishment we get everyday” (Tanga 2009, 114).

The views expressed in these studies suggest that the difficulties of work in Chinese-owned garment factories have negatively impacted women’s views of the ultimate benefits of Chinese engagement in Lesotho. However, it is likely that views of China differ among Basotho women with higher levels of education and more economic security. Many high-skilled Basotho have been able to take advantage of Chinese funded workshops in telecommunications and solar energy application technology, and some have been recipients of educational scholarships provided by the Chinese governments (Tanga 2009). For those women not dependent on garment work for their livelihood, China’s presence in Lesotho may seem beneficial, not only for their own futures but also to the economic trajectory of the country. On a broader scale, the studies mentioned at the beginning of this section illustrate precisely this dynamic, by which African women with more assets can take advantage of opportunities, which in turn reduces or eliminates the gender gap in perceptions of China.

## Discussion and Conclusion

China’s presence in Africa over the past decades has had visible and lasting impact on African societies. Africans vary in their perception of Chinese economic and political engagement on the continent. As documented in multiple studies, there is also a systematic gender gap in African views on this issue. Our study sets out to explain this gender gap. We find strong evidence in favor of economic security explaining why some African women view Chinese economic and political engagement in Africa less positively than their fellow male citizens. Across multiple measurements of economic security, among economically vulnerable populations, women hold a more negative opinion of China than men. A case study of women workers in the Chinese-owned garment factories of Lesotho revealed the ways in which poor women’s experiences with abuse and exploitation in Chinese firms have impacted their views of Chinese engagement in the country.

These findings speak to the larger literature on Chinese economic expansion and international economic exchange. Not gender-specific cultural or ideological concerns, but economic vulnerability drives the gender gap in attitudes that we have consistently observed. This corresponds to recent work suggesting that risk aversion, vulnerability, and room for economic potential explain differing attitudes across genders on international trade, investment, and other forms of exchange. Our study also provides insight on how these very factors shape women’s lived experience of Chinese economic activities in Africa. Finally, these findings contribute to a growing literature on gender gaps in political behavior on the African continent, and in turn, help us unpack the place of African women in a changing political and economic landscape.

The gender gap, and its roots in differing economic vulnerability, is relevant for politics in Africa and beyond. As female representation in legislatures grows, our study raises the question of whether female legislators will articulate the

skepticism toward China of the women they represent, or whether female legislators' personal economic situation may render them less concerned about Chinese economic engagement compared to the female mass public. Moreover, it raises a question about how women's votes could, in the future, influence the trajectory of Chinese policy in African countries.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000357>.

**Data replication.** Replication data and supporting information for this article can be found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jkarreth>. All analyses were conducted using R version 4.3.0.

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**Competing interest.** The authors declare no competing interest.

## Notes

1. See, e.g., "China Square: The cheap Chinese shop at the centre of Kenya row" (BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64809423>, accessed 2023-09-28.)
2. See: "How Chinese Traders Out-Compete in Africa" (China-US Focus, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/how-chinese-traders-out-compete-in-africa>, accessed 2023-09-28.)
3. See: "African Female Workers in Chinese Companies in Kenya: Myths and Challenges" (China Global South Project, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/migrated-posts/africa-kenya-workers-women-f> accessed 2023-09-28.)
4. All robustness tests mentioned here are printed in the supporting information and/or available from the authors.

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