

Gender Gaps in Support for Vigilante Violence

Anna M. Wilke[‡]

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Abstract

Mob vigilantism - the punishment of alleged criminals by groups of citizens - is widespread throughout the developing world. Drawing on surveys with more than 13,000 respondents from Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa, this paper shows women are more likely than men to support mob vigilantism. Qualitative evidence, a vignette experiment and survey measures suggest men and women differ in their beliefs about mob vigilantism. Men are more convinced that mob vigilantism creates risks of false accusation for those who do not commit crime. I trace this divergence in beliefs to differences in men's and women's personal risk of being accused of a crime that they did not commit. The results speak against the notion that women are inherently more opposed to violence than men.

Keywords: vigilantism, women, Sub-Saharan Africa, crime, punishment, informal, justice

*Washington University in St. Louis, wanna@wustl.edu

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1 Introduction

When confronted with criminal acts, ordinary citizens in developing countries frequently eschew the police. Instead, they call on their community – neighbors, friends, and family – who apprehend and brutally punish or even kill the accused. Mob vigilantism of this kind is extremely widespread. A police report from Uganda suggests vigilante mobs killed more than one person per day in 2013 (Uganda Police, 2013). In the city of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, groups killed roughly one person every two days during a period of five years (Ng’walali and Kitinya, 2006). In South Africa, the police registered almost six cases of vigilantism per day in 2018, with about two resulting in murder (SAPS, 2018/2019). Because many incidents of mob vigilantism do not come to the attention of the authorities, these numbers are likely underestimates.

Mob vigilantism often turns into gruesome public spectacles watched by entire communities (Fujii, 2017). In many cases, spectators do not step in to stop the violence but rather cheer it on. Where police attempt to investigate, they frequently face communities whose members refuse to testify and frustrate the police’s attempts to separate witnesses from perpetrators. Sometimes such non-cooperation is driven by fear of retaliation, but other times by a desire to protect perpetrators. In addition to those who actively inflict violence, vigilante acts are thus fueled by larger groups of people who view mob vigilantism as legitimate and are willing to support it.

This paper investigates who supports mob vigilantism and why. Much of the existing literature on non-state mechanisms of crime control focuses on the role of state capacity.¹ I instead home in on the social drivers of mob vigilantism. I draw on original survey data collected through over 13,000 interviews in Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa, as well as the Afrobarometer (2011-2013), to demonstrate that there is a robust gender gap in support. Women are substantially more likely to support vigilante violence than men.² In some instances, the share of women who prefer vigilantism over police intervention exceeds that among men by a factor of almost two-to-one.

What explains this gender gap? I draw on two additional data collection efforts to investigate this question. Study 1 consists of a vignette experiment that was implemented in Uganda in 2017. Study 2 uses survey measures collected in Tanzania in 2019 and 2021. Study 1 suggests women and men differ in their beliefs about mob vigilantism. A possibility that seems to loom large in the minds of men is that vigilantism can be directed towards the “wrong” person. Rather than the outcome of a deliberate investigation and adjudicative process, vigilante acts are typically committed by “angry mobs” that move to murderous violence with little deliberation. The evidence suggests men see scenarios conducive to false accusations as more plausible than women. That men perceive the risk of false accusations to be higher may be one reason for the gender gap in support.

Why might women and men diverge in their perceptions of the risk of false accusations? One reason may be that women face a lower personal risk of being falsely accused and attacked by a vigilante mob.³ In study 2, 71% of men believe it somewhat or very likely that they could be attacked for a crime that they did not commit. Only 48% of women think they could be targeted in this way. If the risk of being attacked is concentrated on men, they may have a greater incentive to learn about the prevalence of false accusations. Women and men may also judge the overall risk of false accusation based on their own experiences and those of people in their social networks – which, in gender conservative societies, are often formed along gender lines. The gender divergence in personal exposure to risks may thus lead men to perceive the overall risk of wrongful accusations as higher, which, in turn, may dampen their support for mob vigilantism.

In sum, I argue that gender conditions support for mob vigilantism, because it shapes how men and women understand the risks of mob vigilantism.⁴ I describe several alternative explanations and show that there is little empirical support for them.

This study makes several contributions. First, the paper is one of few to explicitly investigate how gender shapes support for mob vigilantism.⁵ To the extent that gender plays a role in existing work, gender is mostly included as a control variable in large multivariate

regressions. The results of these analyses are difficult to interpret, because many of them condition on attitudinal variables that are plausibly affected by gender *and* by the respondent's views on vigilantism.⁶ I make use of seven original data sources from three contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa to show that women consistently support mob vigilantism at higher rates than men.

These results seem surprising because anecdotal evidence suggests most perpetrators of vigilantism are men. That support is lower among men, however, does not imply all men oppose vigilantism. My theory suggests mob vigilantism may be more popular among subgroups of men who are unlikely to be falsely accused. In Tanzania, for example, I found support to be high among tight-knit groups of motorcycle taxi drivers, who may be able to defend themselves against vigilante attacks. The dynamics that induce a supporter of vigilantism to personally harm a criminal suspect are likely complex and that perpetrators tend to be men is the case for most kinds of violence.⁷

Even though few women personally attack criminal suspects, the finding that women support vigilantism at higher rates adds to our understanding of why such attacks occur. Women can encourage and discourage vigilantism in important ways. Women have instigated vigilante acts and may convince bystanders to take part.⁸ Having witnessed a vigilante incident women can cooperate with police and may encourage others to do the same. The views of parents are also particularly likely to shape how mob vigilantism is viewed by younger generations. Finally, women, just like men, may join movements that protest vigilantism. Such movements exist in several parts of the world and seem to have had some success in bolstering police presence in affected areas.⁹

Mob vigilantism poses risks even for people who are not involved in criminal activities. One advantage of a well-functioning judiciary is that adjudication takes a more regulated form designed to protect the rights of criminal suspects. My findings suggest that the downsides of vigilantism and hence the relative benefits of the state do not have the same salience for all citizens. Groups like women who are less prone to personally experience false

accusations may not be equally drawn to a system with stronger due process protections. One way to bolster citizens' opposition to vigilantism and foster their engagement with the state may thus be to raise awareness about the risk of false accusations inherent in non-state practices like vigilantism. The realization that vigilantism can endanger people who did not commit crime has fueled protest against vigilantism in the past. In 2018, for example, protests erupted after mobs in India killed more than two dozen people in response to false rumors about child kidnappers (Pokharel and Griffiths, 2018). As one protester explained:

“Everyone could feel: ‘it could have been my son, it could have been me’ (...)
That feeling is impacting people a lot” (Kachari, 2018).

The findings presented here also contribute to a large public opinion literature that finds women to be generally less supportive of violent practices than men. This literature is concentrated in the United States and Western Europe and covers a range of domains including views on capital punishment (Applegate, Cullen, and Fisher, 2002; Hurwitz and Smithey, 1998; Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000), gun control (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986), military aid and the usage of troops (Fite, Genest, and Wilcox, 1990), defense spending (Togebly, 1994), inter-personal violence, and the display of violence on television (Smith, 1984). One common interpretation of these findings holds that traditional gender norms socialize women into an “ethic of care,” which leads them to oppose violence (Gilligan, 1993). The notion that women are more opposed to violence than men has also come to structure popular expectations about the consequences of female empowerment. Fukuyama (1998), for example, predicts that “[a] truly matriarchal world (...) would be less prone to conflict and more conciliatory and cooperative than the one we inhabit now.”

By focusing on a kind of violence that is ubiquitous in developing countries, this paper joins a set of studies that add nuance to these claims (Dube and Harish, 2020; Karim et al., 2018; Tessler, Nachtwey, and Grant, 1999; Tessler and Warriner, 1997). My findings suggest women can support violent practices at higher rates than men, even in societies where women are expected to play caregiver roles. In contrast to existing work, I interpret this gender gap

as resulting from differences in the *beliefs* women and men hold, rather than from differences in their tastes. I do not argue that women have a greater preference for violent punishments of those who commit crime. Neither do I claim that men care more about protecting those who do not commit crime. Instead, I show that women and men have different beliefs about the extent to which mob vigilantism targets the innocent and trace this disparity to gender differences in experiences with mob vigilantism.

This belief-based explanation highlights the importance of information in explaining violence. Some theories of violence are premised on the idea that violent acts are an outcome of people’s preferences. Theories of civil war, for example, point towards deep seated grievances or actors’ desire for material gain (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Classic theories of crime highlight the importance of economic benefits and material sanctions (Becker, 2000). Other parts of the literature have focused on the importance of beliefs and information. Seminal accounts of interstate war, for example, conceive of violence as a result of insufficient information about resolve and capabilities (Fearon, 1995). This paper joins this latter kind of studies in pointing towards the importance of beliefs about the world as forces that shape people’s support for violent practices.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides background on the phenomenon of mob vigilantism. Section 3 describes the estimation strategy and section 4 the main results – estimates of the gender gap in support for vigilante violence. Section 5 presents a theoretical framework and empirical results on the mechanisms which may give rise to this gender gap. Section 6 considers alternative explanations. Section 7 concludes.

2 Background

This special symposium is about collective vigilantism defined as group violence that punishes perceived offenses to the community. This study focuses on a sub-category of collective vigilantism that I refer to as mob vigilantism.¹⁰ The term “mob” indicates that this form of vigilantism is perpetrated by spontaneously formed groups of ordinary citizens. This

characteristic sets mob vigilantism apart from other forms of vigilantism that are perpetrated by organized groups such as peasant committees (see Gitlitz and Rojas, 1983, on Peru), state-sponsored crime prevention panels (see Baker, 2008, on Uganda), armed self-defense groups (see paper 5 in this symposium on Mexico) or gangs (see Rodgers, 2008, on Nicaragua).

I limit the geographic focus of this study to Sub-Saharan Africa because mob vigilantism predominates in many parts of the region. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, I concentrated data collection efforts on Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa – three contexts in which mob vigilantism has been a recurring topic of public concern. See papers 3 and 4 in this symposium for work on similar kinds of spontaneous violence in other contexts.

Mob vigilantism sometimes resembles other forms of group violence, such as racially motivated lynchings and ethnic riots (Tolnay and Beck, 1995; Scacco, 2010; Wilkinson, 2006, and paper 8 in this symposium). Like these other forms, mob vigilantism disproportionately targets certain groups. Below, I provide evidence that mob vigilantism is more often directed toward men than toward women. Anecdotal accounts suggest members of minority groups may be particularly likely to be targeted. However, even if discriminatory in practice, the incidents that I focus on do not have as their putative purpose the persecution and control of identity groups. Rather, mob vigilantism is a response to alleged criminal acts.

I focus predominantly on violence in response to offenses that fall under the jurisdiction of the state, such as robbery, assault, and reckless driving. However, I also consider a gray zone of mob vigilantism that arises in response to social transgressions many citizens may consider “criminal” even though these transgressions do not fall within the purview of the state. Into this gray zone falls mob vigilantism in response to allegations of black magic or witchcraft.¹¹ In the contexts covered here, group-based punishments appear to arise more commonly in response to allegations of petty crime than in response to witchcraft allegations. Among 426 cases of vigilante killings in Uganda in 2013, for example, 70% were a response to theft, robbery, or burglary, and 9% a response to murder. Only 1% arose in response to allegations of witchcraft (Uganda Police, 2013).¹² As I describe in more detail below, witchcraft-related

vigilantism is nonetheless of interest to this study. Previous research suggests that the ability to use black magic is often attributed to women (Miguel, 2005; Oster, 2004), which provides a potentially informative contrast.

I generally assume that mob vigilantism is more “violent” than state punishments for equivalent transgressions. While mob vigilantism may sometimes deescalate or end without debilitating injury, respondents in this and other studies describe horrific acts of murder and torture. One common method of punishment called “necklacing” involves burning victims to death by placing a tire over their shoulders, filling it with petrol, and setting it alight. Even though reports of human rights abuses by police and carceral systems exist in the contexts that I focus on, such abuses are not as endemic as in other contexts where police are highly militarized. Prior work suggests that countries with common law systems are less prone to state torture than those which inherited civil law systems and the associated inquisitorial institutions (Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020; Conrad and Moore, 2010). All three countries that I study had at least some exposure to a common law system under British colonial rule. These similarities increase comparability across cases but also limit my ability to predict whether results would be different in contexts with stronger and more abusive states. I use data from the Afrobarometer to provide some evidence of the generalizability of results across Sub-Saharan Africa.

3 Empirical Strategy

I draw on diverse sources of survey data to measure respondents’ support for mob vigilantism. Details of sampling and question wording will be discussed for each result in turn below. The following linear regression specification is used to estimate gender gaps in support:

$$\mathbf{Y} = \alpha + \beta\mathbf{x} + \mathbf{C}\boldsymbol{\gamma} + \boldsymbol{\epsilon}.$$

\mathbf{Y} here is a vector of binary indicators for whether the respondent supports mob vigilantism as opposed to reliance on police; α is an intercept; \mathbf{x} is a vector of binary indicators

for whether the respondent identifies as a woman and β the main coefficient of interest; C is a matrix of, depending on the sample, region or community fixed effects and γ the vector of associated coefficients; ϵ is a vector of error terms that allow for heteroscedasticity. Two-tailed p -values are calculated using a Wald test of the null hypothesis that the coefficient on gender is zero based on a normal approximation to the sampling distribution. Outcomes have been imputed through bootstrapping.¹³

4 Main Results

Table 1 displays the main results. The key takeaway is that, across different samples, countries, and question wordings, women consistently express higher support for mob vigilantism than men. In some cases, the share of women who support mob vigilantism is almost twice as large as the share of men.

The first three columns draw on data collected in 2015, 2016, and 2017 as part of an unrelated study on mass media and social norms in 168 villages in Uganda’s central region. Respondents in each village were sampled at random, but the set of villages is a convenience sample. Villages were selected to fit two criteria. First, each village had to have a local video hall. Video halls are akin to makeshift movie theaters and common in rural Uganda. Villages also had to be at least four kilometers apart from all other villages in the sample.¹⁴

Analyses in columns that label the “Mob target” as “Driver” rely on a survey question that asks respondents to imagine that a truck driver drove through their village and ran over a small girl, killing her. The scenario suggests that a group of men from the respondent’s village got hold of the driver. Respondents are asked which of two statements comes closest to her view:

1. The group of men should beat the truck driver to teach him a lesson.
2. The group should leave it to the police to investigate and to determine the truck driver’s punishment.

	Mob Vigilantism Preferred over Police Intervention										
	Ug. 1	Ug. 2	Ug. 3	Tan. 1	Tan. 2	Tan. 3	S.A.	Pooled	Afrobar.		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Woman	0.048*** (0.012)	0.047*** (0.007)	0.048*** (0.017)	0.036** (0.014)	0.044* (0.024)	0.054** (0.022)	0.005 (0.037)	0.043 (0.032)	0.024 (0.018)	0.043*** (0.005)	0.023*** (0.003)
Avg. men	0.06	0.06	0.12	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.1	0.07	0.1
Area FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mob target	Driver	Driver	Thief	Driver	Thief	Thief	Thief	Thief	Driver	Mix	
Crime victim	W	W	W	W	W	M	W	M	W	Mix	
Observations	2,431	5,534	1,956	1,365	601	604	232	264	1,300	13,246	51,587
Adjusted R ²	0.013	0.014	-0.004	0.019	0.007	0.027	0.001	0.043	0.003	0.016	0.072

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: Across seven different samples in Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa, as well as the 2013 Afrobarometer, women are more supportive of mob vigilantism than men.

Coefficients stem from a linear model that regresses a binary indicator for whether the respondent supports mob vigilantism as opposed to reliance on police on community or region fixed effects and a binary indicator for whether the respondent identifies as a woman. Heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Significance stars are based on a two-tailed Wald test of the null hypothesis that the coefficient on gender is zero using a normal approximation to the sampling distribution. The samples used in columns 2 and 3 share 1,041 respondents. The row “Avg. men” shows the mean outcome among men. The row “Mob target” shows information about the accused who was attacked by a mob in the survey vignette. The row “Crime victim” indicates whether the accused was described as having committed a crime against a man (M) or a woman (W).

Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 show that women in the 2015 and 2016 samples are five percentage points more likely to select the first statement than men. Among men, 6% of respondents agree with the first statement. In relative terms, the support for mob vigilantism is thus 80% higher among women. The p -value indicates that this difference is highly unlikely to arise due to sampling variability alone ($p < 0.01$).

In 2017, during re-interviews of some 2016 respondents and interviews with new respondents from the same villages, I changed the question to focus on mob vigilantism in response to marketplace theft. The question wording was designed to create empathy with the crime victim. By placing the statements of support for mob vigilantism in the words of “friends,” I also hoped to reduce social stigma associated with endorsing violence. The question read:

Suppose a widow from your village is selling soap in the market in order to raise enough money to send her son to school. One day, when she is about to close up for the day, a young man on a boda [motorbike] from a different village rides past and grabs her money, stealing all the money that she made during the day. Observing the incident, some men from your village manage to push the driver off his bike. One friend turns to you and says, “We should call the police, this man could be hurt.” The other friend says, “The police won’t do anything, we should punish him now.” Which friend would you agree with?

The results are reported in column 3. As expected, the alternative wording elicits higher levels of support. At 12%, men’s rate of support for mob vigilantism is twice as high as when they are asked about the truck driver. However, the absolute difference between men and women’s support remains constant. Women are five percentage points more likely to indicate they would agree with the friend who endorses mob vigilantism. In relative terms, the gender gap is smaller, but support for vigilante violence is still 40% higher among women.

Column 4 reports results based on data from a survey conducted in 2018 in thirty-six villages in Pangani, Tanzania, as part of a natural experiment on radio and social norms (Green et al., 2022). Respondents were randomly sampled from within villages, and villages

were selected as a function of their proximity to radio transmitters. The question wording is the same as in columns 1 and 2, focusing on the treatment of a truck driver who recklessly killed a young girl. Again, there are sizable and statistically significant gender differences. Women are four percentage points more likely than men to support mob vigilantism. As in the samples from Uganda, the share of men who support mob vigilantism against a truck driver is 6%.

So far, all survey measures involved scenarios in which vigilante mobs punish someone who is accused of having committed a crime against a woman or a girl. This question wording raises the concern that the observed gender gap in support is an artifact of the measurement strategy. For example, women may identify more strongly than men with the crime victims in these scenarios and hence have a greater demand for punishment. Columns 5 and 6 report results from a survey in which I randomly varied the gender of the crime victim in the survey vignette. The survey was part of a separate field experiment on radio soap operas conducted in thirty rural villages throughout fifteen wards in Tanzania's northeastern Tanga Region (Green, Groves, and Manda, 2021). Again, the villages were selected non-randomly as a function of the experimental requirements, and respondents were randomly selected within villages. The question read:

A [man/woman] from your community is blowing the whistle, because [he/she] saw someone stealing food and a box of cold drinks from [his/her] yard. The neighbors come running and one of them gets hold of the thief. Again, which of the following do you believe the neighbors should do?

The pronouns in square brackets distinguish the two versions of the scenario that differ in terms of the gender of the crime victim. I used simple random assignment and each respondent was read one scenario. Respondents who answered "The neighbors should beat the thief there and then" instead of "The neighbors should call the police and leave it to them to deal with the thief" are coded as supportive of mob vigilantism. Despite differences in region and question wording, the results are remarkably consistent with the three Ugandan

samples and the other sample from Tanzania. Women are four to five percentage points more likely than men to support mob vigilantism, irrespective of whether the crime victim is a man or a woman. Hence, the gender gap does not seem to be driven by the gender of the crime victim in the vignettes.

I included the same randomized question wording in a small survey conducted in Tanzania in 2021. The survey aimed to randomly sample forty respondents from thirteen randomly selected villages in Pangani District, Tanga Region.¹⁵ The results are reported in columns 7 and 8. Column 7 provides little evidence of a gender gap when the victim is described as a woman. When the victim is described as a man, support is again roughly four percentage points higher among women. Perhaps due to the much smaller sample size, this difference is not statistically significant. Again, the results provide no evidence that the gender gap in support is driven by women’s identification with the crime victim. If anything, the gender gap appears larger when the victim is described as a man.

Column 9 reports the gender gap in answers to the truck driver question fielded during a nationally representative survey in South Africa. Citizen Surveys South Africa included the question as part of their May 2018 public opinion survey, fielded in-person among a multi-stage, stratified random sample. The estimated gender gap is again positive, though it is not statistically significant.

In column 10, I pool the samples included in columns 1 through 9.¹⁶ Across data collection efforts from 2015 to 2021 that surveyed over 13,000 respondents, I find women are four percentage points more likely than men to support mob vigilantism over police intervention. The standard error is small relative to the estimated effect, suggesting the likelihood of this difference arising due to sampling variation alone is low ($p < .001$).

In the final column of Table 1, I use the 2013 round of the Afrobarometer data to test for gender gaps in support for mob vigilantism across thirty-four Sub-Saharan African countries. The question asks, “If you were a victim of crime in this country, who, if anyone, would you go to first for assistance?” Respondents are coded as supportive of mob vigilantism if they

answered they would first go to their “own family or friends” or that they “would join with others to take revenge.” Again, there is statistically significant (if substantively smaller) evidence for a gender gap in support for mob vigilantism. Among men, 10% of respondents say that they would turn to friends or family, or that they would join others in taking revenge. The share of women who choose these vigilantism related answer options exceeds that of men by roughly two percentage points.

5 Mechanisms

Why might women be more supportive of mob vigilantism than men? In this section, I delve into beliefs that may underpin the gender gap in support. I use survey measures and vignette experiments from Uganda and Tanzania to provide evidence that men and women differ in their understanding of vigilantism. I show that men are more likely to believe that mob vigilantism poses risks for the innocent, and that these risks may be concentrated on men.

5.1 Conceptual framework

Vigilante acts consist of gruesome assaults and often result in the death of criminal suspects. Nonetheless, a substantial minority of citizens in the contexts studied here appears to support vigilantism. What generates demand for such extreme violence? In qualitative interviews, respondents often justified their support by pointing out that those who commit crime deserve harsh punishments and that harsh treatment of “criminals” in public will teach a lesson to others who commit crime. One South African woman said, for example, “Yes, when we get them [‘the criminals’], we will kill them,” suggesting criminal suspects deserve to be executed. Similarly, market vendors in Uganda spoke in favor of the public beating of thieves with a *kiboko* (heavy cane), explaining that they believed this practice to discourage other pickpockets.

Vigilante punishments are typically harsher than sentences handed out by the state. It is common for vigilante mobs to kill suspects for snatching a handbag or for burglary of

household items. Such petty crimes would, at most, result in a prison sentence when reported to the state. Incidents of vigilante violence are also often watched by entire communities. A preference for harsh and public sanctions, linked to an inherent taste for punishment or a strong concern for deterrence of crime, may thus drive demand for vigilante violence. This logic is in line with other work on vigilantism. Smith (2019) argues, for example, that supporters of vigilantism in South Africa believe that the state does not punish criminals harshly enough.

An assumption that appears to underlie the view that vigilantism is an effective way to punish wrongdoers is that vigilante acts are indeed directed towards those who break the law. Anecdotal accounts suggest, however, that the evidence base for community judgments of guilt or innocence is often tenuous. Where suspects have not been caught red-handed, accounts of individual witnesses or vaguely related circumstantial evidence often seem sufficient to trigger violence.¹⁷ These features open the door for both accidental accusations of innocent individuals who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and deliberate false accusations.

The possibility that vigilante attacks could target innocent community members may be one downside that shapes citizens' views on vigilantism. Even someone who would like those who commit crime to be executed may be hesitant about supporting a practice that executes innocent people. Moreover, the suspicion that vigilantism targets non-criminals may create doubts about its deterrent effect. The ability of vigilantism to deter crime crucially depends on the perceived correlation between guilt and the likelihood of being the target of vigilante violence. To see why, imagine that vigilante mobs were known to randomly select their victims without regard to involvement in crime. In this case, all citizens would face the same likelihood of being attacked by a mob, irrespective of whether they engage in crime. Vigilantism should not have any impact on whether individuals decide to break the law in this scenario. Finally, the notion that vigilante mobs may target innocent community members also raises the possibility that oneself or one's friends or family could be attacked

for a crime that was committed by someone else. The possibility of wrongful accusation may dampen citizens' categorical support for mob vigilantism.

Similar dynamics have been documented with respect to harsh punishments by the state. Norris and Mullinix (2020), for example, show that information about the prevalence of wrongful convictions in the US justice system reduces overall support for capital punishment. In relative terms, however, I expect the risk of false accusation to be a more salient concern with vigilantism than with state punishments. State justice institutions in the contexts studied here tend to be weak. Whether rightly or wrongly, the rates at which these institutions convict individuals are low. Moreover, even in states with weak due process protections, state institutions do engage in adjudicative processes that move considerably slower than the split-second decisions made by mobs. Hence, it seems likely that concern about the risk of false accusations would lead individuals to favor the state over vigilante violence.

The possibility that mob vigilantism could be directed at individuals who did not commit crime appeared to loom large in the minds of men I spoke to in qualitative interviews. The head of security of one of the largest markets in Uganda, for example, described how he must be careful where he puts his hands when he moves about the market, lest his brushing past someone be mistaken for an attempt at pickpocketing. Similarly, a South African respondent recalled a case in which a man was running away from a group of men who were attempting to rob him and ended up being mistaken for the accused and attacked. Market vendors in Uganda mentioned that criminals sometimes levy false accusations against innocent vendors in the market to create a mob situation that allows them to escape. Finally, a young man in South Africa expressed the view that mobs often beat up people who did not actually commit the crime of which they are accused. When asked whether he was personally afraid of being accused, he responded: "it is very risky." He explained that, once one has been accused, it is almost impossible to convince "the community" of one's innocence.¹⁸ Women, on the other hand, were less likely to mention the risk of false accusations in qualitative interviews.

Of eleven female focus group participants and interview respondents in South Africa, for example, not one mentioned false accusations as a problematic feature of vigilantism – all seemed convinced that vigilante mobs mostly assault victims who in fact committed a crime. Hence, one reason for the gender gap in support for vigilantism may be that men are more convinced of the risks that it poses not only for those who commit crime but also for those who do not.

A second factor that may play a role is that the risk of being accused of a crime that one did not commit is likely concentrated on men. In many contexts, men are more likely to commit crimes than women. Figure 1 in section A.1 of the online appendix shows that women make up roughly 3% of the prison population across Sub-Saharan Africa. Unless state justice systems are severely biased in favor of women or women are substantially better at committing crimes without being caught, the plot suggests that most crimes are committed by men.

Vigilante mobs make quick decisions about whether someone is guilty, often in the face of substantial outrage over the crime that was committed. Widely held beliefs about the kinds of people who typically commit crime may play an outsized role in who is singled out as a target. As a consequence, the risk of being falsely targeted for a crime that one did not commit may be substantially higher for men than for women.¹⁹ In line with this logic, Uganda’s Annual Crime Report lists that 94% of the 508 people killed by mobs in 2013 were men (Uganda Police, 2013), which is similar to the figures reported in a recent press review in Ghana by Adzimah-Alade et al. (2020), who find 92% of those targeted by mobs are men. Almost all cases of vigilante violence that came up in qualitative interviews were directed at men.

In principle, this gender divergence in personal risk may be a direct cause of the gender gap in support. Maybe, women support mob vigilantism at higher rates because they themselves are unlikely to be attacked. Yet, most women have sons, brothers, or husbands. It seems unlikely that women would support a practice which is known to put their male

family members at risk. What seems more plausible is that the divergence in exposure to personal risk may help explain why women and men tend to have different *beliefs* about the overall risk of false accusations.

Both women and men may judge the overall risk of false accusations based on their personal experience and the experiences of people in their networks. If the risk of being punished for a crime that one did not commit is concentrated on men, men may over- and women may underestimate this risk, especially in gender conservative societies where most communication happens along gender lines.²⁰ Alternatively, men may have greater incentives to learn about the frequency of false accusations. Scrutinizing an allegation may not be a priority among people who never expect to be subject to allegations. However, people who feel they could be falsely accused themselves may pay greater attention to the details of the evidence base or attempt to investigate after the fact. Hence, men may face stronger incentives to learn about the risk of false accusations than women.

One exception to this logic may be vigilante attacks in response to accusations of “witchcraft” or “black magic.” In some contexts, stereotypes about witches are highly gendered with the stereotypical “witch” being a woman (Miguel, 2005). Where this is the case, the risk of being accused of and punished for using witchcraft may be concentrated on women. Moreover, it is unclear what it means for a witchcraft allegation to be based on a tenuous evidence base or how one should think about certainty of guilt in the case of witchcraft. Neither my measurements of support for vigilantism nor my explanation for the gender gap fully extend to witchcraft related vigilantism. Hence, the subsequent analyses mainly focus on vigilante violence in response to offenses unrelated to black magic. I discuss findings that relate to witchcraft in passing.

5.2 Study 1: Gendered understandings of vigilantism in Uganda

I designed a vignette experiment to answer two questions. First, do men and women indeed differ in their assessments of whether vigilante violence can be a response to allegations of crime that rest on a tenuous evidence base? Second, what are respondents’ beliefs about

whether vigilante violence tends to target men and women, respectively? The experiment was implemented as part of the 2017 household survey in rural Uganda described above (Wilke, Green, and Cooper, 2020; Green, Wilke, and Cooper, 2020). Respondents were asked to rate a hypothetical scenario that involves an act of vigilantism in terms of how likely they believe it is that the scenario could happen in their village. Several characteristics of the scenario were randomly varied in order to find out what kinds of vigilante scenarios men and women find plausible.

5.2.1 Design

The 2017 household survey encompassed a sample of $N = 1,956$ respondents from rural Ugandan villages (see section 4 for details on sampling). As part of a longer interview on a variety of topics, enumerators read the following scenario to respondents:

Imagine a situation in which a [man/woman] [from your community] [is accused of/is observed] [stealing from/using black magic against] a [man/woman] [from your community]. [A bystander/the victim] gathers a group of people [in the garden/in the market place] and they [beat/kill] the [accused/perpetrator].

The square brackets indicate attributes that were varied at random. Each attribute could take two values. For example, the accused was introduced as either a man or a woman. The second attribute shows only one expression because the accused was labeled as “from your community” or no information was given on the origin. All attributes were varied independently using simple random assignment. Each respondent was read one randomly assigned scenario. Respondents were then asked to rate how likely it is that such a situation could occur in their community.

Three attributes were designed to vary the extent to which the scenario allows for false accusations. First, I varied whether the scenario implies that the suspect has been caught red-handed. The scenario describes the suspect as either being “observed” or “accused” of committing the offense. The word “observed” primes respondents to think that witnesses

exist. The word “accused” creates the possibility of a more tenuous evidence base. Second, the scenario refers to the suspect either as “the accused,” which suggests uncertainty of guilt, or as “the perpetrator,” which suggests certainty of guilt. Finally, I varied whether the group of vigilantes who beat the accused is gathered by a bystander or the victim. Mention of a bystander suggests again that there is at least one other person who is willing to corroborate that the crime happened. A scenario in which the alleged victim herself rallies the community leaves more room for accusations to be fabricated. Apart from the extent to which the scenario implies a tenuous evidence base, I also varied the gender of the person who is the target of the vigilante act.

I seek to understand the effect of these variations on whether women and men believe the scenario could happen in their village.²¹ The theory suggests variations which make false accusations seem likely should increase the share of men who rate a scenario as plausible. The effects of such variations should be smaller, if not negative, among women. Moreover, irrespective of the respondent’s gender, I expect vigilante acts that target women to be perceived as less plausible than those which target men.

Analyses exclude respondents who received scenarios in which the suspect is accused of black magic rather than theft. Results for respondents that were assigned to a black magic scenario are shown in the online appendix. As standard in the literature on vignette experiments (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto, 2014), I focus on the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of each prime. The effect of each prime may vary depending on the other details of the scenario to which a respondent was assigned. The AMCE reflects the average effect of each prime taken across the distribution of all other scenario characteristics that results from the randomization scheme. I estimate separate AMCEs among men and women as well as the difference between these effects by regressing the outcome on an indicator for assignment to the respective prime, an indicator for the respondent’s gender and the interaction between the two. Hypothesis tests are based on heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors.

5.2.2 Results

I begin by describing the effect of the primes that vary the extent to which the scenario allows for false accusations. The first subtable of Table 2 displays the percentage of women and men who indicate that the vigilante incident could happen in their village broken down by whether respondents were assigned to a scenario that mentions that the crime has been observed.

Men are roughly five percentage points *more* likely to say the scenario could happen in their village if the scenario does not specify that the crime has been observed. Even though this estimate falls short of statistical significance, the direction of the effect suggests men are more inclined to deem a scenario plausible if it leaves open the possibility that the target of the vigilante act is innocent. The opposite is the case for women. The share of women who consider it likely that the scenario could happen in their village is around nine percentage points *lower* if the scenario does not mention that the crime has been observed. This difference in means is highly statistically significant. In contrast to men, women thus seem more inclined to deem vigilante scenarios plausible if the guilt of the suspect appears certain. These results support the notion that men are more likely to believe that vigilante mobs operate on a tenuous evidence base.

This interpretation is re-enforced when I focus on the descriptive differences across men and women, holding constant the randomized primes. The share of women who consider plausible a scenario in which a suspect has merely been accused but not observed is almost ten percentage points lower than the share of men who consider such a scenario plausible. When it comes to scenarios in which the suspect has been observed, on the other hand, the share of women who believe that such a scenario could happen in their village exceeds that of men by roughly four percentage points.

Mob responding to [observation / suspicion] of crime could happen in my village.			
	Women (N = 543)	Men (N = 465)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
Suspect was observed (N = 529)	65.3%	61.4%	+3.9 pp.
Suspect was accused (N = 479)	56.1%	66.5%	-10.4 pp.**
<i>Estimated prime effect:</i>	-9.2 pp.**	+5.1 pp.	-14.3 pp.**

Mob targeting [perpetrator / accused] could happen in my village.			
	Women (N = 543)	Men (N = 465)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
Suspect described as ‘perpetrator’ (N = 535)	60.3%	59.3%	+1 pp.
Suspect described as ‘accused’ (N = 473)	61.7%	69.3%	-7.7 pp.*
<i>Estimated prime effect:</i>	+1.4 pp.	+10.1 pp.**	-8.6 pp.

Mob instigated by [bystander / victim] could happen in my village.			
	Women (N = 543)	Men (N = 465)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
Bystander instigates mob (N = 501)	62.6%	59.5%	+3.1 pp.
Victim instigates mob (N = 507)	59.2%	67.8%	-8.6 pp.**
<i>Estimated prime effect:</i>	-3.5 pp.	+8.2 pp.*	-11.7 pp.*

Mob could happen when all three primes [reduce / heighten] false accusation risk			
	Women (N = 149)	Men (N = 128)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
All three primes reduce risk of false accusation (N = 149)	67.9%	49.2%	+18.6 pp.**
All three primes heighten risk of false accusation (N = 128)	52.3%	71.4%	-19.1 pp.**
<i>Estimated prime effect:</i>	-15.5 pp.*	+22.2 pp.***	-37.7 pp.***

Table 2: Beliefs about the plausibility of vigilantism among women and men in Uganda

Data stem from 2017 household survey in rural Uganda. Results are estimated among subset of respondents presented with an incident of theft (as opposed to black magic). Last subtable is subset to respondents assigned either to all three primes that increase uncertainty of guilt (scenario does not mention that crime was observed, suspect is referred to as “accused” and incident was instigated by victim) or to none of these primes (scenario mentions that crime was observed, suspect is referred to as “perpetrator” and incident was instigated by a bystander). Significance stars are based on a two-tailed Wald test of the null hypothesis that the AMCE is zero or that group means or AMCEs are equal across genders. Variance estimates are heteroscedasticity-robust. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Similar patterns appear in the second and third subtables of Table 2. Men are roughly ten percentage points more likely to think it plausible that a vigilante incident could happen in their village if the suspect is referred to as “the accused” rather than the “perpetrator.” The estimate is highly statistically significant. The same change in wording does not appear to have any effect on women’s assessments of whether a scenario is plausible.

Turning to the identity of the instigator, men are eight percentage points more likely to deem victim-instigated incidents plausible as compared to bystander-instigated incidents. Again, this difference is statistically significant. Women are, if anything, less likely to believe that an incident could have happened in their village if the incident was instigated by the crime victim. Finally, comparing across genders, both subtables illustrate men are more likely than women to believe in scenarios that suggest the suspect may not have committed a crime.

The final subtable restricts attention to extremes, comparing respondents who received all three of the primes signaling uncertainty of guilt or none of them. Scenarios that do not mention that the crime was observed *and* refer to the target of the vigilante act as “the accused” *and* state that the vigilante act was instigated by the crime victim should be most indicative of the possibility that the suspect may not have committed the crime. Conversely, scenarios that describe the crime as observed *and* refer to the suspect as the “perpetrator” *and* state that the vigilante act was instigated by a bystander should provide the strongest indication that the suspect is guilty.

The patterns that emerge are striking. A little less than half of the men who were assigned to a scenario that strongly implies certainty of guilt believe that the scenario could have happened in their village. Among men who were assigned to a scenario that casts doubt on the guilt of the target, roughly 70% consider the scenario plausible – an increase of more than twenty percentage points. This effect is highly statistically significant. Among women, the effect is almost of the same size but in the opposite direction. Roughly 68% of women who were assigned to a scenario that implies certainty of guilt believe that the scenario could

have happened in their village. This share decreases by almost sixteen percentage points to around 52% if women are asked to consider a scenario in which the evidence base seems tenuous. Not only are the estimated effects among women and men statistically significant, but the difference between them is highly statistically significant as well. Moreover, the estimated gender gaps indicate men are almost twenty percentage points more likely than women to consider scenarios in which the evidence base is tenuous plausible. The share of women who believe that scenarios that strongly imply certainty of guilt are plausible exceeds the share of men who find such scenarios convincing by roughly the same amount.

Overall, the results from the vignette experiment are in line with the patterns that emerged from the qualitative evidence. Women appear to believe less strongly in the possibility that vigilantism can be directed towards someone who did not commit a crime. Men’s perception of high risks of false accusations may lead them to support vigilantism at lower rates than women.

Mob targeting [man / woman] could happen in my village.

	Women (N = 543)	Men (N = 465)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
Mob targets woman (N = 491)	57.9%	55.7%	+2.2 pp.
Mob targets man (N = 517)	63.7%	72.4%	-8.7 pp.**
<i>Estimated prime effect:</i>	+5.8 pp.	+16.7 pp.***	-10.9 pp.*

Table 3: Beliefs about the plausibility of vigilantism among women and men in Uganda by whether the target is a woman or man

Data stem from 2017 household survey in rural Uganda. Results are estimated among subset of respondents presented with an incident of theft (as opposed to black magic). Significance stars are based on a two-tailed Wald test of the null hypothesis that the AMCE is zero or that group means or AMCEs are equal across genders. Variance estimates are heteroscedasticity-robust. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This divergence in beliefs may be due to men being more likely to become the targets of vigilante attacks. Do women and men indeed see vigilante violence that is directed toward women as less plausible? Table 3 shows that both women and men appear to find scenarios in which vigilante mobs target a man more plausible than scenarios in which the target is a woman. The estimated difference between the share of women who believe that, respectively,

a man or a woman could be targeted is roughly six percentage points. This difference falls short of statistical significance. Among men, the estimated difference is almost seventeen percentage points and the estimate is highly statistically significant. While this evidence does not directly speak to the risk of *false* accusations, these patterns suggest men perceive themselves as more likely to be targeted by vigilantism than women. The tendency is similar among women, though less pronounced.

Taken together, the results of the vignette experiment are in line with the idea that men perceive considerable risks of vigilante violence for those who are not involved in criminal activities. Men also seem to perceive themselves as the primary targets of mob vigilantism. Women, on the other hand, appear less convinced that vigilantism can target citizens who have not committed a crime and do not hold as strong a view as men of the gender gap in victimization.

Tables A1 and A2 in section B.1 of the online appendix show that patterns are less clear cut among respondents assigned to scenarios involving black magic. Here, none of the primes that imply a tenuous evidence base appears to make a difference for the extent to which men and women rate a scenario as plausible. The gender of the person who is the target of the vigilante attack, however, does appear to matter. Men are twelve percentage points more likely to rate a scenario as plausible if the target is a man. The share of women who find a scenario plausible increases by five percentage points when the target is a man, but this estimate falls short of statistical significance. These results suggest the belief that magical offenses are typically committed by women may not be as widespread in Uganda. The findings also support the notion that certainty of guilt is a murkier concept when it comes to black magic.

5.3 Study 2: Vigilantism and false accusations in Tanzania

The survey in Uganda did not include direct measures of citizens' perceptions of the likelihood of false accusations and did not elicit respondents' views on the risk that they could *personally* be punished for a crime they did not commit. Instead, the vignette experiment manipulated

the degree to which scenarios of vigilantism allow for false accusations through subtle primes. This approach helps shed light on the kinds of scenarios that women and men find plausible while guarding against experimenter demand effects. Study 2 takes a more direct approach and asks respondents about their perceptions of the risk of false accusations.

5.3.1 Design

Study 2 is based on a 2019 survey with $N = 1,205$ respondents and a 2021 survey with $N = 496$ respondents in rural Tanzania (Green, Groves, and Manda, 2021). Details on sampling are provided in section 4 above. The study included two measures of respondents' perceptions of the likelihood of false accusations. The first measures general beliefs about the accuracy of community perceptions of guilt but is not specific to vigilante violence:

I will now read you two statements. Please tell me with which of the statements you agree more, even if you do not agree with either one completely.

- Statement 1: If most people in a community think that a person is a criminal, that person is probably a criminal.
- Statement 2: If most people in a community think that a person is a criminal, this does not mean that the person is actually a criminal.

The second measure presents respondents with a scenario in which vigilante violence targets an innocent person and asks them to assess the likelihood that they themselves could become the victim of such violence:

Imagine the following situation: A group of people accuses someone of stealing and beats up the person. Later, it turns out that the person was innocent. How likely do you think it is that you would ever be falsely accused and attacked in this way?

- It is very likely that [I/an innocent person] could be falsely accused.
- It is somewhat likely that [I/an innocent person] could be falsely accused.

- It is not very likely that [I/an innocent person] could be falsely accused.
- It is not likely that [I/an innocent person] could be falsely accused.

The brackets indicate a difference in answer options across surveys. In the 2019 survey, the answer options mistakenly referred to “an innocent person.” In the 2021 survey, the answer options match the question and refer to respondents themselves. Since enumerators are prone to skip answer options when reading out questionnaires, it seems likely that respondents’ interpretation of the question reflects the question stem rather than the answer options. Hence, I interpret the measure as capturing perceptions of respondents’ personal risk of being falsely accused.

5.3.2 Results

Table 4 shows that women and men are about equally likely to think community perceptions of guilt may be wrong. Around 45% of both women and men believe someone who is deemed a criminal by most people may not necessarily have committed a crime. Hence, women and men do not seem to differ in their assessments of the likelihood that communities may wrongly denounce community members. That said, the question used to elicit these responses does not explicitly mention vigilante violence. Do women and men differ in their assessments of whether they could personally become the victim of a vigilante attack without having committed a crime?

The lower subtable reports the share of women and men who think it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could be personally attacked for a crime that they did not commit. Here, there is a large difference between men and women. Around 48% of women believe it likely that they could be falsely accused and attacked. The share of men who believe that they could be attacked in this way is 71%. That men perceive a greater risk of personally becoming the victim of a false accusation may be one reason why men find vigilante scenarios that are based on a tenuous evidence base more plausible and why they are less supportive of mob vigilantism than women.

Some people suspected of crimes are not necessarily criminals.

	Women (N = 864)	Men (N = 837)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
% who agree:	45.5%	44.9%	+0.6 pp.
It is somewhat or very likely [I/an innocent person] could be falsely accused.			
	Women (N = 864)	Men (N = 837)	<i>Estimated gender gap:</i>
% who agree:	47.6%	71.1%	-23.5 pp.***

Table 4: Beliefs about mob vigilantism among women and men in Tanzania

Data stem from a 2019 and 2021 household survey in rural Tanzania. Significance stars are based on a two-tailed Wald test of the null hypothesis that group means are equal across genders. Variance estimates are heteroscedasticity-robust. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6 Alternative Explanations

The previous section has proffered an explanation for the gender gap in support for mob vigilantism. Women and men have different understandings of the risk that such violence poses to innocent bystanders and may face varying kinds of risks themselves. Of course, I cannot conclusively establish that these variations are behind the gender gap in support that I observe. Such questions about mediation are notoriously difficult to answer. One problem is that women and men are likely to differ along many dimensions other than their beliefs about the risk of false accusations. I here provide evidence which speaks against the notion that the gender gap in support is driven by other ways in which women’s views about justice diverge from those of men.

6.1 Differential police treatment

Most of my measures of support for mob vigilantism invite respondents to identify which of two alternatives they prefer, mob vigilantism or police intervention. Accounts of mistreatment and misogyny at the hands of predominantly male police forces can be found throughout the world, as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, one might ask whether women are more likely to support mob vigilantism because they hold a dimmer view of police than men.

Table A3 in section B.2 of the online appendix displays estimates of gender gaps in several measures of respondents’ approval of police. Columns 1, 2, and 4 suggest women

in two of the Uganda surveys and the first Tanzania survey are *more* likely than men to expect satisfactory police treatment if they were robbed. Column 3 illustrates that women in Uganda are more likely to think it unlikely that a police officer would expect a bribe in exchange for police work. Columns 5 and 6 provide no evidence that women are less trusting of police than men in South Africa and the Afrobarometer sample. Columns 7 and 8 show women in the Afrobarometer sample are less likely than men to believe that police are corrupt and are no more likely to report difficulties with access to police.

In sum, the table lends no support to the notion that gender gaps in support for mob vigilantism are driven by women’s distaste for police. If anything, women are more likely than men to expect satisfactory treatment from and to trust in police.

6.2 Differential demand for deterrence

Previous research has suggested women may be more afraid of crime than men and as a result more supportive of harsh punishments (Hurwitz and Smithey, 1998). Perhaps, women express greater support for mob vigilantism because they have a stronger preference for deterrence. To investigate this possibility, the 2017 survey in rural Uganda elicited respondents’ demand for harsh punishments, independent of respondents’ support for mob vigilantism. Specifically, the focus was on respondents’ views about punishment by the state. Because it was unclear a priori what kinds of punishments would be considered severe, the seriousness of the crime and the length of the resultant sentence were randomized:

Imagine you’ve been robbed at [gunpoint / knifepoint] and you report the robbery to the police. They arrest the robber, and he will be kept in prison for [1/5/10] year[s]. Is that a severe enough punishment, or should he have been punished more?

1. It is severe enough
2. He should have been punished more

Column 1 of Table A4 in the online appendix shows that women in the sample are indeed

more supportive of harsh punishments than men. Columns 3 and 5 display estimates of the gender gap in support for mob vigilantism from a regression that controls for respondents' punishment preferences. The goal is to understand whether gender conditions support even if one “blocks” the causal path running from gender to support through demand for harsh punishments. Indeed, the estimated gender gap in support remains of roughly the same magnitude and statistically significant (columns 3 and 5). This result provides some reassurance that women's greater demand for punishment alone cannot account for the gender gap. Note, however, that this interpretation rests on strong assumptions about the absence of confounders in the relationship between gender, punishment preferences and support for mob vigilantism (see VanderWeele, 2015, chapter 2.3).

6.3 Differential demand for due process

I argue that women support mob vigilantism more than men because women estimate the risk of getting the “wrong” person to be lower. Implicit in this claim is the notion that, if women came to believe that this risk is higher, their support for mob vigilantism would drop. An alternative possibility is that men simply care more about protecting those who do not commit crime. If so, a mere change in women's *beliefs* about the risk of false accusations would not be enough to counter their support for mob vigilantism. The 2017 Uganda survey included the following question to elicit how respondents navigate the trade-off between effective punishment and due process protections:

What about situations in which you cannot be sure whether the accused actually committed a crime? Some people say that it is better to punish the accused there and then even if you are not certain of their guilt, because otherwise they might get away with it. Others say that you should get all of the facts before deciding whether to punish someone even if it means that guilty people will sometimes escape punishment. Which view comes closest to your own?

1. It is better to punish the accused there and then even if you are not certain

of their guilt, because otherwise they might get away with it

2. You should get all of the facts before deciding whether to punish someone even if it means that guilty people will sometimes escape punishment

As can be seen in column 2 of Table A4 in the online appendix, there is no evidence that women have a greater willingness to punish without certainty of guilt. Moreover, the estimated gender gap in support for mob vigilantism remains unchanged when controlling for respondents' demand for due process (columns 4 and 5). Hence, the evidence does not support the interpretation that women's greater support of mob vigilantism is driven by a greater tolerance for punishments of those who do not commit crime.

7 Discussion

Across a range of domains and industrialized settings, a large public opinion literature finds greater support for violence among men than among women. In this paper, I document that women support vigilante violence at higher rates than men across seven original surveys conducted in different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. While vigilante violence is like other violence in that it is mostly perpetrated by men, women nonetheless play an important role in limiting or exacerbating the prevalence of mob vigilantism. Women around the world are frequently assaulted and robbed and may be driven to instigate mob vigilantism. Conversely, women and men who do not support vigilantism may stop others from participating or deescalate incidents.

Drawing on qualitative evidence, vignette experiments, and additional survey data from Uganda and Tanzania, I have explored the underpinnings of the gender gap in support for vigilante violence. The findings show that men are more convinced than women that vigilantism poses risks even to those who do not commit crime. I trace this disparity in beliefs to differences in the extent to which women and men are personally affected by such risks.

Like many existing accounts of women's apparent opposition to violence, my explanation

points towards the influence of distinct gender roles in society. I suggest that the perception that crimes are mostly committed by men and not women results in a concentration of the risk of being falsely accused by a vigilante mob on men. In contrast to existing accounts, however, I do not link differences in how society treats women and men to tastes for violence. The essence of my account is not that women have a stronger desire for violent punishments of those who commit crime. Nor do I argue that men are inherently more inclined to protect those wrongly accused. Instead, I demonstrate that women and men hold different *beliefs* about the extent to which vigilantism threatens the innocent and argue that these beliefs drive varying levels of support.

While I have shown that the gender gap in support for vigilantism exists across several samples from Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to ask whether this finding will travel to other points in time and parts of the world. Some aspects of the argument suggest that one should expect to see similar patterns elsewhere. Given the spontaneous and unregulated nature of mob vigilantism, the risk of false accusations is likely a recurrent feature. It is not difficult to find anecdotes about vigilante attacks on innocent citizens in contexts other than the ones considered here.²² In contexts where the risk of being attacked for a crime that one did not commit concentrates among men, similar divergences in beliefs may arise. All else equal, such beliefs may produce similar gender gaps elsewhere. However, it is entirely possible that other ways in which gender identity shapes people's experiences may offset or even reverse the patterns observed here.

One more complicated question is why the gender disparity in beliefs about vigilantism persists despite cross-gender communication and whether the factors that contribute to its persistence are present elsewhere. If men are personally afraid of being wrongly accused, why do they not communicate this fear to the women in their lives? Presumably, women would not want to support a practice that puts their husbands, sons, and brothers at risk. While definitively answering this question falls outside the scope of this paper, the data allow me to speculate.

Figure 2 in section B.3 of the online appendix shows that the gender gap in support for vigilantism widens with age in the seven original samples from Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa. Women and men support vigilantism at almost the same rate among eighteen-to twenty-year-olds, but the gender gap measures five to seven percentage points among those of age thirty or older. Since older cohorts differ from younger ones in many ways, this pattern is open to multiple interpretations. One possibility in line with my findings is that older cohorts were raised under gender norms that limit cross-gender communication and help sustain the divergence in beliefs across women and men. Another is that women in older cohorts were more confined to tasks in the home and had less exposure to village-level processes such as vigilantism. The ability of these and other explanations to account for gender differences in public opinion observed elsewhere remains a topic for future research.

In contexts in which the gender gap does exist, my interpretation suggests that informing both women and men about the tenuous evidence base of vigilante attacks may be one way to reduce support for vigilante violence. Such campaigns may also reduce the gender gap in support observed here and increase citizens' willingness to draw on state justice institutions. A promising next step to solidify these conjectures will be to randomly expose individuals to information about the risk of false accusations inherent in mob vigilantism. Such a test can be done relatively inexpensively in the context of a survey experiment. A more ambitious research design may invite participants to interact with victims who were attacked for a crime that they did not commit or to attend screenings of video messages that dramatize the risk of false accusations. Either design would shed light on the potential of campaigns that stress the risks that vigilantism poses for those who do not commit crime to shore up societal opposition to vigilantism.

Notes

¹See, for example, Acemoglu et al. (2020), Cooper (2018), Blair (2019), Blair, Karim, and Morse (2019), Lazarev (2017), Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo (2020), Sandefur and Siddiqi (2011), Wilke (2020), and papers 3 and 5 in this special symposium.

² I use the terms “men” and “women” to describe gender identities, not biological traits. Thus, “women” includes cis- and transgender women. As my measures rely on self- or enumerator-coded binary gender identification, I cannot explore whether results differ for cis- and trans-gendered or non-binary individuals.

³Below, I consider that this argument may be less applicable to accusations of black magic.

⁴This explanation stands in contrast to work which argues that support for extra-judicial violence reflects deontological and not consequentialist concerns (e.g., Baron et al., 2021). Note, however, that my account does not preclude the importance of deontological reasoning. Preferences over mob vigilantism are likely the outcome of many different mechanisms. Moreover, I here focus on explaining the gender gap in preferences between men and women. Baseline levels of support may well reflect deontological considerations.

⁵One exception is a chapter by Abrahams (1998) that provides an ethnographic account of women’s engagement in vigilantism. Abrahams describes vigilantism as a mostly male dominated activity but speculates about how women’s involvement may change as a result of female empowerment. He does not focus on levels of support.

⁶These attitudinal variables are “colliders” on the path from gender to support for mob vigilantism (Pearl, 2009). The evidence regarding the existence of a gender gap in support is mixed. Papers on Ghana (Tankebe, 2009), Pakistan (Tankebe and Asif, 2016), and the Netherlands (Haas, de Keijser, and Bruinsma, 2014) provide no statistically significant evidence of a gender gap. Two studies in Latin America find that support for vigilantism is greater among men (Nivette, 2016; Zizumbo-Colunga, 2017).

⁷This is well known for other, better studied forms of violence. Heise (1998), for example, discusses a complex web of factors that drive men to engage in violence against women. Besides dominant views on gender, these factors include perpetrators’ childhood experiences with violence, alcohol consumption, exposure to peer pressures, and more.

⁸A report from South Africa provides an example: “Let me give you an example of what happened in my neighborhood just this morning at 5.00am! We heard a woman screaming *i-Bag yam? I-Bag yam? Nal’isela* (My bag! My Bag! Here’s a thief!). In no time, I mean, in no time, everybody was coming out, slamming doors behind them. I mean, it was like a split second – and they were all dressed in their clothes, not pyjamas. It was as if they were waiting, ready all night for exactly this kind of thing to happen. Then they descended upon this man – they came with all sorts of weapons to assault him. Rocks on the street were thrown at him. In no time, the man was gone – in no time – they had finished him” (Khayelitsha Commission, 2014, p.342).

⁹Social movements following several necklacing incidents in Cape Town, South Africa, for example, led to a government inquiry called the Khayelitsha Commission in 2014.

¹⁰The introductory essay to this symposium provides a typology of vigilantism. Mob vigilantism is equiv-

alent to the category “spontaneous collective vigilantism.”

¹¹ Another example is so-called “cow vigilantism” in India, whereby predominantly Muslim citizens are attacked by groups of predominantly Hindu citizens in response to allegations of killing cows. While many states place legal restrictions on cow slaughter, states such as Assam experience cow vigilantism despite placing no such restrictions.

¹²20% of incidents arose as a result of other unspecified causes.

¹³For each missing value, one non-missing value is sampled at random. This procedure is, in expectation, identical to mean imputation. Section C.2 of the online appendix shows that results are almost identical if missing values are instead eliminated through listwise deletion.

¹⁴The distance constraint in the 2015 sample was five kilometers. In 2015 we interviewed 2,431 and in 2016 5,534 respondents. In 2017, we re-interviewed 1,041 respondents from the 2016 survey and 915 new respondents. When conducting pooled analyses, the answers of 1,041 respondents who were re-interviewed in 2017 are excluded, and the sample is restricted to responses from the first time when respondents were asked about mob vigilantism in 2016. In total, we interviewed 8,880 unique respondents in Uganda. See Wilke, Green, and Cooper (2020) and Green, Wilke, and Cooper (2020) for more details on sampling.

¹⁵The within village sampling strategy resembled the one we used in studies in Uganda (Wilke, Green, and Cooper, 2020; Green, Wilke, and Cooper, 2020). Since the survey was a follow-up to another survey, not all sampled respondents were available. Non-available respondents were replaced using a random walk procedure.

¹⁶ Excluding 1,041 observations from the sample in column 3 who were already interviewed as part of the sample in column 2.

¹⁷The following anecdote illustrates the fragility of the evidence base on which vigilantism can be based. Residents of a police precinct in South Africa’s Northwest Province where I conducted fieldwork in 2018 assaulted a man who had come to the precinct from a neighboring community. Community members found that the man had in his possession a phone, which was thought to have been stolen by a group of men known for their addiction to nyaope (a prevalent drug in South Africa). Since those engaged in substance abuse often exchange stolen goods for drugs, community members concluded that the man must be a drug dealer. Police arrived before the accused was injured and could not ascertain any evidence that the accused was involved in the drug business. It remained unclear whether his phone was indeed the phone that had been stolen, and whether any phone had been exchanged for drugs.

¹⁸ Similar accounts can be found in other contexts where mob vigilantism is prevalent. Consider the following example from an article on lynching in Nigeria: “In Ikeja, Lagos, in 2011, two men, Alaba and Samuel were severely beaten and very nearly killed for eating human flesh. Closer investigation showed that

what they'd been chewing on was, in fact, beef ” (Cole, 2012).

¹⁹See Farmer and Terrell (2001) for similar arguments about gender and crime in the US context.

²⁰Zalman, Larson, and Smith (2012) make use of a similar logic to explain why non-white respondents in the US perceive a greater frequency of wrongful convictions by the state's justice system than white respondents.

²¹The original answer options were “Something like this would never happen in my village,” “Something like this could happen, but it is not very likely,” “This is the sort of thing that sometimes happens in my village” and “Things like this are very common in my village.” I focus on a binary indicator that takes the value zero if the respondent said “Something like this would never happen in my village” and the value 1 otherwise. Section C.1 in the online appendix shows that results are qualitatively similar when using the ordinal measure as an outcome.

²²Consider a case of mob vigilantism that provoked widespread protests in July 2018 in the Indian state of Assam. Two young men from the state capital went to visit a famous waterfall in the poor, rural district of Karbi Anlong. Unbeknown to the men, rumors of child kidnappers had been circulating for months in the villages neighboring the waterfall. The men were confronted by a villager as they relaxed by a river, so they fled in their car. Convinced he had caught the child kidnappers, the villager phoned ahead to the next community, who stopped the men and beat them for over an hour and a half, as they pleaded for their lives.

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