

## **Crisis and Gender in Legislative-Executive Relations**

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### **Introduction**

The interaction of the legislative and executive is gendered in nature. Gender shapes what actors in these two institutions demand from each other. This pattern is, for instance, visible in the distinct policy priorities of women and men in parliament (see e.g. most recently Allen and Childs 2019; Bäck and Debus 2019; Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019) and, in consequence, how they engage and oversee related government initiatives. At the same time, gender also influences the strengths and weaknesses that actors in the legislature and executive ascribe to each other and, hence, their mutual assessment. Members of parliament (MPs) and party gatekeepers, for instance, tend to favor men for the most influential and resourceful portfolios, since they believe that masculine traits are necessary or suitable to succeed in governmental positions and membership in often men-dominated political networks remains an important route to qualify for ministerial office (see e.g. Krook and O'Brien 2012; Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019). Change in these dynamics is scarce or occurs only gradually, meaning that the way the interaction between the executive and legislative is gendered is usually stable.

Crises – situations in which the basic structures and fundamental norms of a system are under threat – reshape this pattern. Pressure to act in a timely manner is even more pronounced than in normal times and the lack of information, time constraints, and complexity lead to exceptionally high levels of uncertainty (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 6-7). This uncertainty disrupts the regular cooperation between political actors in the legislature and executive and thus potentially also changes the role of gender in this process. Focusing on parliamentary democracies, in this contribution we lay out a research agenda surrounding the question *how crises change the way legislative-executive-relations are gendered*.

Shedding light on how crises change expectations about the capacity of both men and women to serve in parliament or government enhances our understanding of how prejudices against women characterize the interaction between parliament and government. Thus, this contribution focuses on how the perceptions of MPs and MEx (members of the executive branch) influences their direct interaction, rather than how these actors take voters' aspirations into account (but see Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och in this special issue). We present the idea that different categories of crises shape MPs' beliefs about the attributes of a good MExs, as well as MExs' beliefs about the attributes of good MPs. 'Act fast – give slack' crises (e.g. earthquakes) call for rapid decision-making by MExs and soft legislative oversight by MPs and re-affirm ideas about men's more pronounced capabilities as politicians. By contrast, 'transform together – build trust' crises (e.g. democratic backsliding) require fundamental changes in the political system and have the potential to positively influence views about women in politics. We explain these patterns using theories of gender stereotypes and homosocial networks. Taking into consideration the type of event, and actors' specific expectations about effective crisis management strategies and how these expectations correspond to ideas about women in politics, shows how crises transform the role of gender in legislative-executive relations and opens up new avenues for future research.

## **Gendered expectations and legislative-executive relations: From normal times to crisis**

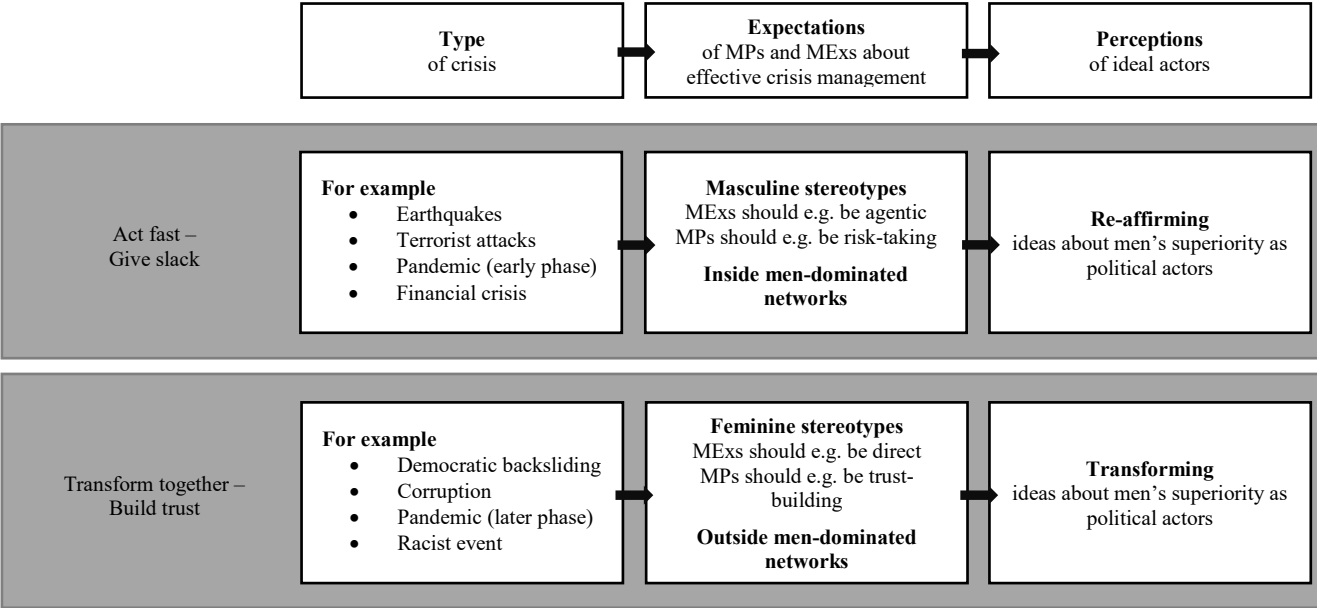
Legislative-executive relations illustrate how institutions and their interactions are gendered. Institutional rules and norms foresee that the executive relies on the support and benevolence of the legislature to enact policies and efficiently organize state affairs (Strøm 2000). MExs require the support of MPs belonging to the same party (Norton 1993) and complex legislative processes provide room for MPs to influence government policies (Saalfeld 2014). When considering their chances to get policy proposals successfully through parliament, ministers assess how much effort it takes to convince MPs to support the legislative initiative. During this process, MExs are likely to believe that men representatives are the more reliable allies. Theories of homosocial capital suggest that trust between group members is more pronounced than between members of different groups (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019). As most MExs are men, they should be more likely to trust men MPs. Given that these patterns are part of political socialization, powerful networks are likely to remain relatively closed to women.

The legislature also relies on the government as a trustworthy agent that takes care of the state affairs in a reliable and competent manner. MPs expect MExs to display strong political leadership, including toughness and decisiveness, and these traits are typically ascribed to masculine behavior. Thus, men are perceived to be better suited for leadership positions, especially for the most influential and resourceful ministerial posts. Additionally, men MPs tend to profit from membership in homosocial networks since it allows them to informally discuss and influence actions of men in government. As a result, the relationship between the executive and legislature is gendered in nature, with gender stereotypes but also homosocial networks defining how men and women work within as well as the interaction *between* these institutions.

Crisis situations create stress for legislative-executive relations as they distort the equilibrium in place during normal times. Under pressure, different expectations become important for MExs and MPs when assessing the competency of their counterparts. MPs expect MExs to deal with the crisis in an appropriate manner and evaluate whether the minister has the necessary resources to address the emerging challenges. At the same time, MExs expect MPs to offer adequate support for their crisis management activities and make assessments whether MPs' have the skills to help navigate the crisis.

These expectations crises create concerning the ideal reaction of actors in each institution change the gendered dimension of legislative-executive relations, as shown in Figure 1. Different crises categories shape MPs' expectations about the traits and skills desirable in a MEx, as well as MExs' beliefs about the characteristics MPs should ideally possess to overcome the challenging situation. During crises categorized as 'act fast – give slack', MExs need to react quickly, while MPs should be open to provide unquestioned support for executive decisions. In "transform together – build trust" types of crisis, MExs are supposed to develop new common ground and MPs should establish trust for these actions among the broader public. Since these expected behavioral patterns are systematically linked to actors' gender, crises can re-affirm or transform beliefs about women's ability to be valuable players in the executive and in parliament.

**Figure 1:** How different crises shape the role of gender in legislative-executive relations.



In ‘act fast – give slack’ crises situations, MPs expect a task-oriented, directive, or transactional leadership from ministers. Earthquakes exemplify such a situation, as they create extremely urgent situations in which leaders need to take decisions quickly. Many subordinates need to be coordinated and responsibilities have to be clearly defined. Another typical scenario constitutes a terrorist attack: Leaders have to choose from a set of different possible solutions and, to avoid deadlock, a direct leadership style is considered crucial. Moreover, the definition of clear goals and their accountability appears desirable. Since such a behavior is typically associated with men (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001), MPs perceive men ministers to be more suitable in addressing these types of crisis.

Turning to expectations of the executive towards the legislature, during ‘act fast – give slack’ types of crisis, ministers should favor MPs who provide unquestioned support for their decisions. MPs’ openness to limit formal and informal oversight due to time pressure allows executives to react in a fast manner. However, MPs must be willing to risk undesired action by the government if they give up their right to question all facets of the measures proposed by the government. An example for such a situation is the early phase of a pandemic, during which

legislative oversight is set aside to allow the government to react quickly to changing crisis circumstances. During these crises that demand more leeway for governments and lower levels of MPs' involvement, men are probably also perceived as the more reliable allies in parliament. First, feminine traits of compromise-orientation and consensus-seeking make women less appreciated partners during crises that need reactive behavior, because ministers might believe that they are more likely to insist that the parliament has a voice in the decision-making process. Second, their absence from men-dominated high-trust networks makes women MPs less reliable allies for MExs who have to take risky decisions under time pressure. Overall, crises falling into this category hence lead actors to form additional expectations about the role of gender for the interaction of legislative and executive and reaffirm ideas about men's superiority as agents and reliability as principals.

In "transform together – build trust" crises situations, MPs favor an interpersonally-oriented, participative and transformational leadership style by MExs. A corruption scandal serves as a good example, since leaders have to carefully rebuild interpersonal relations within the administration and transform existing structures in a way that prevents future abuse. A racism crisis triggered by the death of a minority member after police violence is also a suitable illustration, because leaders have to credibly question the status quo and encourage all members of the police to commit to fighting discrimination. These requirements match the leadership styles stereotypically associated with women (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001), so that MPs should perceive women to be the more promising executives during such times.

Moreover, "transform together – build trust" types of crisis might lead MExs to expect MPs to take an active role, in particular by creating trust and legitimacy to government action or democracy more broadly. A typical example is an autocratic backlash, meaning a situation during which democratic institutions have to recover legitimacy. In the long run, a pandemic

can be another typical case for such a scenario because the executive demands the legislature to help create confidence in policies oriented towards response and recovery once the crisis situation extends over a longer period. If regaining trust by the population is one of the most urgent priorities of governments, women should be perceived as reliable partners by MEXs. To begin with, women are said to be more community oriented, less selfish and more integer than men (e.g. Braun et al. 2017; Eckel and Grossman 1998). Moreover, they tend to be excluded from powerful networks and, by explicitly including outsiders, MEXs can signal political change to the public or MPs and hence recover trust. Consequently, crises belonging to this category have the potential to transform actors' expectations about women as legislators and members of the government.

### **Future research**

We argue that executive-legislative relationships are gendered and that crises can re-affirm or transform ideas about men's superiority as political actors. 'Act fast – give slack' crises call for rapid decision-making (e.g. earthquakes) and re-affirm ideas about men's more pronounced capabilities as politicians. 'Transform together – build trust' crises (e.g. democratic backsliding) require fundamental changes in the policy-making process and have the potential to positively influence views about women as political actors. To enhance our understanding of the way legislative-executive relations are gendered, future research should thus take into consideration the type of crisis, the expectations of effective solution strategies that a specific crisis creates for actors, and how these expectations align with stereotypically feminine and masculine traits as well as membership in homosocial networks.

When applying this framework, future research should pay particular attention to the way contextual factors at the systemic and sub-systemic level reinforce or mitigate the patterns outlined above. While our focus here has been on parliamentary democracies, at the systemic

level, distinct dynamics could occur in presidential governing systems. The stronger focus on individual politicians and lower emphasis on party governance and government-opposition dynamics in presidential systems might create more transformational power of crisis in comparison to parliamentary systems in which cabinets are selected by parliamentary majorities.

Within similar governing systems, at the party level, the ideology of those in government and the parliamentary majority could be decisive since it shapes the shares of women in parties, but also commitment of political actors to gender equality and women's inclusion into politics more broadly. The reinforcing effect of "act fast – give slack" crises on ideas about men's enhanced ability to govern might be more extensive in ideologically right-wing parties. By contrast, ideologically left-leaning parties might be more receptive to the way "transform together – build trust" crises promote the perception of women's equal political competencies. Taking these or related aspects into account, and outlining how they modify the extent to which crises shape the way legislative-executive relations are gendered, could add new perspectives to well-established patterns in the field of politics and gender.

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