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Authors
Clayton, Amanda
Heinze, Alyssa
Josefsson, Cecilia
et al.

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When Crises Entrench Gendered Power: Male Elite Adaptation in the Ugandan Parliament

Amanda Clayton[1] | Alyssa Heinze[1] | Cecilia Josefsson[2] | Pär Zetterberg[2]

[1]University of California, Berkeley, California, USA | [2]Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Correspondence: Cecilia Josefsson (cecilia.josefsson@statsvet.uu.se)

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship argues that crises can create opportunities for women's political leadership. Yet crises also create opportunities for male political elites to adapt strategically to preserve their power. We develop and test a theory of crisis-induced adaptation, whereby male political elites respond by shifting political attention toward crisis dimensions that reinforce their authority. We examine this theory using the Ugandan Parliament's response to COVID-19, a health crisis in a policy domain traditionally associated with women. Using the complete corpus of parliamentary debates from 1998 to 2022 and text-as-data analyses, we find no evidence that COVID-19 reduced gender inequalities in legislative speech. Instead, the pandemic widened them. Men's dominance in legislative speech grew as they increasingly framed the pandemic through traditionally masculine policy domains—the economy and national security—rather than public health. Rather than opening space for women, crises can provide men with new opportunities to entrench political dominance.

1 | Introduction

Crises are often thought to unsettle entrenched gendered hierarchies in politics. As major disruptions to the political status quo, crises can create openings for women to exert greater influence in political processes that are typically dominated by men. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship documents such openings across a wide range of crises, including violent conflict (Gaikwad et al. 2023; Tripp 2015), economic upheaval (Armstrong et al. 2024), regime transformations (Hughes et al. 2015; Waylen 2007), and climate-related disruption (Brulé 2023; Heinze 2026).

At the same time, a growing literature suggests that male political elites do not passively cede ground during such moments. Instead, they can *adapt* to crisis-driven openings in ways that preserve existing patterns of political influence (Griffin 2015). Drawing on research on crisis-induced gendered transformation, gendered issue ownership, and elite issue framing, we develop a new theory of *how* male political elites may reassert control following a crisis. We identify two plausible pathways through which adaptation may occur. First, male politicians can claim a newly salient policy domain as their own, even one previously coded as feminine. Second, they may reframe a multifaceted crisis around dimensions already coded as masculine, thereby shifting the crisis onto terrain where they hold an established advantage. Such adaptation may be especially likely in deeply patriarchal political contexts (Brulé 2020). Thus, paradoxically, crisis-induced opportunities for women's expanded political influence may result in the entrenchment of men's political dominance.

We examine whether crises disrupt male political dominance or instead trigger adaptive responses that reinforce it through the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Ugandan Parliament. In some respects, COVID-19 is a plausible case of gendered political disruption, as the pandemic centered on public health, a policy domain in which women have established a strong presence and clear issue ownership. This is particularly true in the Ugandan context, with its history

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of electoral gender quotas and prominent women's leadership (Tripp 2025). More broadly, across a wide range of contexts, women citizens and politicians express greater concern about healthcare and are more likely to prioritize health-related issues than men (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras 2014; Clayton et al. 2019; Gottlieb et al. 2018; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Westfall and Chantiles 2016; Tremblay 1998), and women are often assigned cabinet-level positions in health ministries (Barnes and O'Brien 2025; Krook and O'Brien 2012).[1] An exogenous shock that heightens public health salience may therefore offer women legislators a rare opportunity to exert greater influence, given their recognized expertise on the issue. At the same time, the Ugandan Parliament is a deeply patriarchal institution embedded within an authoritarian regime marked by centralized executive control (Tripp 2000; Tamale 1999; Wang 2013). These conditions give us reason to expect a setting where adaptive responses that preserve male elite dominance are especially likely to emerge. This duality makes the Ugandan Parliament an analytically useful setting for exploring how crises affect gender hierarchies in legislatures.

Drawing on the full corpus of Ugandan parliamentary debates (Hansards) from 1998 to 2022 ($\approx 175,000$ speeches), we use a range of text-as-data analysis techniques to examine how COVID-19 shaped gendered power in legislative speech. We highlight three main findings. First, the pandemic widened the gender gap in total legislative speech, as men increased their speech volume while women's speech volume stagnated or declined. Second, using a large language model (LLM) to classify all speeches by topic, we find no evidence that men pivoted the content of their speeches toward public health to a greater degree than women did as the pandemic unfolded. Indeed, women retained their advantage in health speech, and men did not increase their engagement with health issues relative to women at any point during the crisis. Moreover, both men and women returned their attention to public health to prepandemic levels within months of the pandemic's onset. Third, examining issue frames specific to pandemic speeches reveals that, as the pandemic progressed, men increasingly framed the crisis in economic and security terms–domains broadly considered masculinized, in which they held established policy advantages. We additionally find that this crisis reframing was driven by the highest-prestige actors, male ministers. Together, these findings suggest that elite men adapted to a moment of potential gendered transformation by reframing a public health crisis onto terrain where they held established advantages.

Our work suggests that not all crises disrupt existing gendered hierarchies in politics. Rather, male political elites can adapt to crises by reframing them around dimensions that align with their established expertise, thereby expanding their influence in moments when constituents demand visible action (Boin et al. 2016; Liu 2025). Remarkably, this is true even when the crisis itself favors women's claims to political influence. That a public health emergency–a crisis in a policy domain where women held a clear issue advantage–was so readily reframed in economic and security terms underscores the resilience of male legislators' influence. Whether similar dynamics play out in other crises is an open question, and one that is increasingly tractable as parliamentary text corpora become widely available. Our findings suggest that male elite adaptation may be most effective when crises leave existing distributions of economic and political power intact. More transformative outcomes may instead emerge following more seismic shocks such as genocide and war (Gaikwad et al. 2023; Tripp 2015), large-scale industrial decline (Clark et al. 2026), or major demographic shifts (You 2024).

Our findings contribute to research on crises and representation, gendered issue engagement, and feminist institutionalism. First, we advance research on crises and political representation by demonstrating how shocks can reshape not only who participates in politics but also who is heard in political responses to crises (O'Brien and Piscopo 2023). In doing so, we show that crises centered on traditionally feminine policy domains do not necessarily benefit women; rather, they may elevate those domains in ways that attract male political elites and intensify competition over political voice. Second, we contribute to research on gendered issue engagement by showing how patterns of issue ownership are both historically constructed and contingent on changing political contexts (Barnes and O'Brien 2025; Armstrong et al. 2024). By combining long-term analysis with a sudden shock, we demonstrate how gendered patterns of legislative behavior are reshaped in response to crises, and how apparent opportunities for disruption can trigger adaptive responses that reinforce existing hierarchies. Finally, our findings speak to a core insight of feminist institutionalism: that formal inclusion does not eliminate informal hierarchies (Heinze et al. 2025; Hawkesworth 2003; Kenny et al. 2026; Tamale 1999; Lovenduski 2005; Valdini 2019). A growing body of literature shows that male elites adapt to exogenous threats to their power, reasserting political dominance in new and creative ways (Amar et al. 2025; Chauchard et al. 2025; Heinze 2026; Huidobro et al. 2025; Josefsson 2024; Karekurve-Ramachandra and Sood 2025). We extend this work by identifying crisis-induced elite adaptation as a mechanism by which gendered hierarchies can persist despite apparent moments of disruption. Even as women gain representation and establish authority in specific policy domains, access to political voice remains shaped by shifting power dynamics that can reassert inequality during moments of crisis.

2 | Crises' Transformative Power and Male Elite Adaptation

Crises can create new political opportunities in which women, both as citizens and as leaders, gain previously foreclosed latitude.[2] These openings can emerge by directly depressing men's political and economic power. Genocide (Gaikwad et al. 2023), mass conscription during violent conflict (Berry 2018; Acemoglu et al. 2004), large-scale male out-migration driven by economic upheaval (Kumar 2026) and industrial decline (Clark et al. 2026; Heinze 2026) have been shown to credibly threaten men's political and economic positions, thereby expanding the space women occupy. Openings can additionally result from crises that elevate women's significance and opportunities without necessarily diminishing men's. Health crises, for instance, can foreground caregiving expertise in which women are disproportionately embedded, while climate shocks and natural disasters can reshape which constituencies and claims governments must address (Brulé 2023; Moreno and Shaw 2018; Davidson-Schmich et al. 2026). These

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pathways, moreover, are united by a broader characteristic shared by crises: a disruption of political routine and a reconfiguration of opportunity structures that loosen the constraints that ordinarily limit women's political power (O'Brien and Piscopo 2023; Tripp 2015).

Yet other research suggests that male political elites do not passively cede ground in the face of disruption. Instead, they may *adapt* in ways that preserve their power amid crises.[3] One way this can occur is when elite men become the primary claimants of authority over the crisis and its resolution.[4] For example, early commentary on the 2008 global financial crisis heralded the "death of macho," predicting that the failures of a male-dominated financial sector would create political opportunities for women leaders (Salam 2009; Prügl 2012). Yet the austerity politics that followed displaced gender equality from the policy agenda as elite men reasserted control over the terms of economic recovery (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Karamessini and Rubery 2013), resulting in women's political participation and representation faltering in the crisis's wake (Blanton et al. 2019).

A similar dynamic may emerge even when a crisis falls squarely within a policy domain where women possess a clear issue advantage. The COVID-19 pandemic was widely expected to be such a moment. Early accounts celebrated women leaders' pandemic responses and predicted political gains for women candidates as voters sought leaders associated with health expertise, honesty, and care (Piazza and Diaz 2020; Johnson and Williams 2020). Subsequent research has largely deflated these expectations, finding minimal evidence of pandemic-driven gains in women's representation or substantive influence (Smith 2020; Windsor et al. 2020; Profeta 2021; Piscopo 2020).

2.1 | The Tactics of Male Adaptation

We theorize that male elites can adapt to crises that threaten their political power by effectively co-opting crisis politics in at least two ways. Each of these builds on the notion that crises are not merely objective events but socially constructed phenomena (Horowitz and Remes 2021). First, male elites may claim the crisis issue area as their own, thereby conferring new prestige on a previously feminized domain. Second, they may emphasize dimensions of a multifaceted crisis that are already coded as masculine. Such adaptation need not stem from conscious efforts to exclude women. It may emerge either through strategic attempts to preserve influence and/or through the activation of existing expertise, responsibilities, and issue commitments that are themselves gendered.

The first tactic is issue appropriation: when a crisis emerges in a domain typically perceived as feminine, men with structural power claim ownership over the issue by claiming expertise and visibility in a policy area they had previously neglected.[5] In doing so, a previously feminized domain may become "regendered" as masculine and, therefore, more prestigious. This logic parallels findings from labor economics and economic sociology showing that occupations become more highly valued once they become associated with men (Levanon et al. 2009; Ensmenger 2010). A similar dynamic may occur in politics, whereby men entering a feminized policy space reconstitute it as high-status and thus preserve their dominance within it.

The second tactic is subtly different and involves emphasizing the dimensions of a crisis that are already socially coded as masculine and align with men's established issue advantages (see Boin et al. 2009; Liu 2025). In our case, rather than treating the COVID-19 pandemic primarily as a public health issue, male political elites may emphasize its economic consequences, its implications for national security, or frame the response in martial terms, casting the virus as an "invisible enemy" and the state's response as a "war" (Wodak 2021; Liu 2025). By shifting attention onto terrain where men are stereotypically advantaged in issue ownership, male elites can neutralize the comparative advantage that women might otherwise hold and reassert their own claim to stewardship.

Such reframing can alter who is perceived as most credible or authoritative in addressing the crisis. In this way, even crises originating in feminine-coded policy domains may ultimately reinforce rather than challenge existing gendered hierarchies. These dynamics may be further strengthened by citizens' responses to a threat. A substantial body of research shows that crises trigger preferences for leaders associated with strength, decisiveness, and assertiveness—traits stereotypically coded as masculine (Falk and Kenski 2006; Holman et al. 2016; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Crises, therefore, tend to privilege already dominant actors and the leadership styles associated with them (Griffin 2015). At the same time, citizens rely heavily on elite cues when interpreting ambiguous or novel events (Zaller 1992; Druckman 2001). Male elites thus enjoy considerable latitude to shape the gendered implications of a crisis by foregrounding its masculine-coded dimensions while downplaying its feminine-coded ones. Strategic framing from above and threat-induced preferences from below therefore operate in tandem: elites supply masculine-coded interpretations of the crisis, and a threatened public is primed to receive them. Together, these processes produce a politics of crisis in which male leadership appears uniquely suited to the moment.

2.2 | Expectations for Legislative Behavior

While the adaptation strategies described above can unfold across many political arenas, legislatures provide a particularly revealing setting for observing them. Parliamentary speech offers a direct and measurable record of who claims political voice during a crisis, and legislatures have long served as contested sites of gender power (Waylen 2007; Lovenduski 2005; Tamale 1999; Josefsson 2024). Crises can intensify competition over issue ownership, incentivizing dominant political actors to use the moment to their advantage. As political stakes rise and decision-making becomes more centralized, access to parliamentary speech may become more tightly controlled by the party leadership, which may privilege senior and high-status politicians. Because these actors are disproportionately men, crises may widen existing gender gaps in overall speech. We therefore expect that if male elites deploy either of the two adaptive tactics outlined above (either consciously or unconsciously), men's share of legislative speech will increase relative to women's during the crisis.

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This pattern may emerge from the aggregated behavior of individual members of parliament (MPs) or from a more coordinated, leadership-driven effort.

The two adaptation tactics described above—issue appropriation and strategic frame deployment—generate distinct observable implications for how the substantive topic of legislative speech would shift in the wake of a public health crisis. Consider the first tactic: that men claim ownership of a previously feminine-coded domain. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, public health rapidly rose to the top of the global political agenda. As a result, this policy area, which has traditionally been associated with feminine-coded issues and lower prestige, may have been transformed into a salient, high-prestige, high-stakes domain. Under the logic of re-gendering, the increased salience of public health should attract a broader range of political actors, including senior and high-status politicians who are disproportionately men, thereby crowding out lower-status MPs, such as women. If male elites seek to establish ownership over public health, we should observe men increasingly dominating health-related speech during the crisis.

The second adaptation tactic—reframing the crisis in masculine-coded terms—implies a different pattern. Rather than embracing public health as a newly prestigious domain, male elites may redirect attention toward dimensions of the crisis where they already hold an established advantage. In the context of COVID-19, this would involve emphasizing economic consequences, security concerns, or other masculine-coded dimensions of the pandemic response. If this tactic is employed, we should observe two patterns. First, attention to public health broadly (i.e., across all speeches) should decline after the initial onset of the crisis, as legislative debate shifts toward alternative concerns. Second, pandemic-related speeches should increasingly be framed in terms of the economy or national security rather than public health. We expect this reframing dynamic to be particularly pronounced among the highest-status individuals in parliament. Ministers are the actors most directly engaged in contests over issue ownership and most visible in shaping the national response. They, therefore, face particularly strong incentives to redefine the crisis on terrain where they are advantaged. We accordingly expect male ministers to frame the pandemic disproportionately in economic and security terms, while female ministers continue to emphasize the crisis's public health implications.

3 | COVID-19, Women's Representation, and Patriarchal Power in the Ugandan Parliament

We test our theoretical expectations using the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Ugandan Parliament. The first mention of COVID-19 in the Ugandan Parliament occurred in two speeches in late January 2020, discussing the virus's spread in China (see Appendix S1, Section A). When COVID-19 began spreading in early 2020, the Ugandan government responded swiftly and decisively, implementing one of the world's most comprehensive lockdowns.[6]

Relevant to our speech data, Parliament continued to meet in person throughout the pandemic and never adopted virtual or hybrid sittings. Beginning in March 2020, plenary sittings moved from the main chamber to outdoor tents erected in the parliamentary parking lot to facilitate social distancing and ventilation (Monitor Reporter 2021). Sessions returned to the main chamber in August 2021, initially with access restricted to vaccinated MPs (The Independent (Uganda) 2021), and regular prepandemic procedures resumed in mid-2022 (Daily Monitor 2022). Analyses of parliamentary speech patterns confirm that the underlying structure of debate remained stable throughout the pandemic period (see Appendix S1, Section B).

Although Uganda experienced among the lowest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world (Bwire et al. 2022), the pandemic response had far-reaching social and political consequences. Restrictions disrupted access to essential services, including maternal, reproductive, and child healthcare (Musoke et al. 2023); increased child labor and teenage pregnancies (Datzberger et al. 2023); and were associated with increased human rights violations and political repression, particularly in opposition strongholds (Grasse et al. 2021). Drawing on prior experience with Ebola, Uganda relied heavily on military and security forces to enforce public health measures, further blurring the line between health governance and security and reinforcing forms of authority characterized by coercion, limited accountability, and force (Parker et al. 2022).

In some ways, the Ugandan parliament is a context where we may expect women leaders to capitalize on the pandemic's health-related agenda and expand their influence in parliamentary deliberations. Uganda is a regional leader in women's parliamentary representation, with steady gains in the share of women MPs over the past three decades (Hughes et al. 2017). During our study period (1998–2022), women's representation increased from 18% to 34%, largely due to the expansion of a reserved seat quota for women.[7] Much of the study period also coincides with the tenure of Rebecca Kadaga, who became the first woman Speaker of the Ugandan Parliament in 2011 and served in that role for a decade. Kadaga was a vocal advocate for women's rights, championing legislation to protect women in the workplace and advance gender equality, while also serving internationally as Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (Watchdog Uganda 2024; Ministry of East African Community Affairs, Uganda n.d.). Women legislators in Uganda also have a documented record of political agency. Through the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA) and in collaboration with civil society organizations, women MPs have successfully lobbied for gender-equality legislation and on issues affecting women and children more broadly (Tripp 2025; Ahikire and Ashaba 2020; Goetz and Hassim 2003; Johnson and Josefsson 2016; Wang 2014; Clayton et al. 2017).[8] Taken together, the combination of gender quotas, a rising share of women MPs, a woman Speaker committed to women's policy priorities and an organized infrastructure for collective women's advocacy suggests an institutional environment in which women legislators are well positioned to claim space on a health-centered policy agenda.

At the same time, the Ugandan Parliament operates within deeply patriarchal political structures that have historically constrained women's voice and may amplify male elites' incentives and capacity to adapt during crises. Critics argue that the ruling

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party has strategically used the quota system and the subsequent creation of new districts to consolidate its electoral advantage and expand patronage networks (Green 2010; Muriaas and Wang 2012; Tripp 2025). Moreover, the quota system channels women into a parallel and potentially subordinate track. While both men and women may compete for open (unreserved) seats, few women succeed, and the number of women elected in open constituencies has declined over time. As a result, nearly all women in Parliament are elected from special "women's districts" that overlay unreserved districts.

Parliamentary procedures further advantage male leaders. Ugandan debates do not rely on preprepared speaking lists: MPs must instead stand to catch the Speaker's eye to obtain the floor. Despite this nominal openness, debate rules remain highly formal—an inheritance from British colonial procedure—and the combination of strict decorum and often raucous exchanges has been described as intimidating for many legislators, particularly women (Tamale 1999; Mwiine 2019). Revealing the implicit power asymmetries inherent in these deliberations, women's contributions are less frequently acknowledged by other MPs than those of their male counterparts (Clayton et al. 2014). These dynamics unfold against the backdrop of an authoritarian regime characterized by extensive executive dominance, in which political power remains concentrated in a small, predominantly male elite whose control over agenda-setting and resource distribution is well documented (Tripp 2000; Tamale 1999; Goetz and Hassim 2003; Muriaas and Wang 2012).

The Ugandan Parliament, therefore, provides an analytically useful setting for examining whether women expand their political influence or men entrench their dominance during a feminine-coded crisis. The pandemic elevated a policy area in which women MPs possessed documented expertise and organizational resources. Yet it unfolded within a political system characterized by entrenched male dominance, concentrated executive power, and institutional barriers to women's voice.

4 | Legislative Speech Data Over Time

We examine how elite actors assert authority during a crisis through their behavior in legislative debates. We capture this by examining how much MPs speak, what topics they address, and how they discuss them. Speaking time on the parliamentary floor is a key indicator of legislative visibility and a useful proxy for influence and power. It reflects who has access to the debate proceedings, whose voices are heard, and who can shape debates and set the agenda. A growing body of research documents persisting gender gaps in legislative speech, showing that women often struggle to be heard and may even incur career setbacks when they speak more than men (Kang and Fisher 2021; Bäck and Debus 2019; Pearson and Dancey 2011; Murray 2010; Yildirim et al. 2019; Clayton and Zetterberg 2021). Importantly, this work emphasizes that gender gaps in speech are not static; they fluctuate across institutional settings and within the same legislature over time. While previous work has examined how factors such as women in leadership positions affect gendered speech patterns (Blumenau 2021; Wahman et al. 2021; Fernandes et al. 2023; Wang 2014), our research draws on this literature to examine legislative speech in the wake of a crisis.

Our dataset contains every speech delivered in the Ugandan Parliament between 1998 and 2022, spanning 25 years and six parliamentary terms (the 6th through the 11th Parliaments). The data were compiled from Hansards, the official verbatim records of parliamentary proceedings, available on the Ugandan Parliamentary website. From these records, we constructed a speech-level dataset in which each observation represents a single parliamentary speech.[9] Each statement can be several pages long (e.g., if the MP is giving a prepared speech) or as short as a single word (e.g., if an MP is making an off-the-cuff intervention, such as "Agreed!"). The dataset records over 184,000 unique speeches by more than 1800 MPs who served during this 25-year period. We exclude all official ministerial statements and reports, which primarily convey official positions and ministerial business rather than MPs' own opinions and priorities. The remaining observations consist of statements on legislation, motions, and other official business, including budget introductions and responses to state visits.

We merge the speech data with descriptive information at both the MP and utterance levels. At the MP level, we include the speaker's name, gender, party affiliation, incumbency status (0/1), ministerial status (0/1), and electoral district.[10] Our data also include a small number of MPs who occupy seats reserved for special groups (currently 30, including youth, veterans, and persons with disabilities) as well as ex officio members appointed by the president (typically around 11). These MPs represent their group rather than a geographical unit. At the utterance level, we record the speaker's number of interventions (e.g., whether the utterance represents the MP's first or twentieth intervention), and the month, year, and parliamentary term (6th–11th) of the utterance. The MP-level information is drawn from Clayton et al. (2014), Clayton et al. (2017) and supplemented with official Hansard records for the most recent years. The dataset's long temporal coverage allows us to compare speech patterns before, during, and shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic while situating the crisis within broader trends in parliamentary behavior.

5 | Results

5.1 | The Pandemic Widened the Gender Gap in Total Legislative Speech

We begin by examining whether the COVID-19 pandemic altered the gendered gap in the overall volume of legislative speech. Specifically, we calculate the average number of words spoken by each MP per month over the 25-year period. Figure 1 presents a descriptive plot of these trends over time, with dotted vertical lines marking each parliamentary term and a dashed red line indicating the onset of the pandemic. Black dots represent the monthly average number of words spoken by men, while purple dots represent the corresponding averages for women. Loess lines illustrate the overall trend lines for both groups. Descriptively, men speak, on average, roughly 24% more than women throughout the entire period.[11] This gender gap in verbosity persists even after controlling for MP-level characteristics, such as incumbency, party, and ministerial status (see Models 1 and 2 of Table SI.7, $p<0.001$).[12]

As a way to visualize how gender differences in speech patterns change in response to the pandemic, Figure 2 shows the monthly

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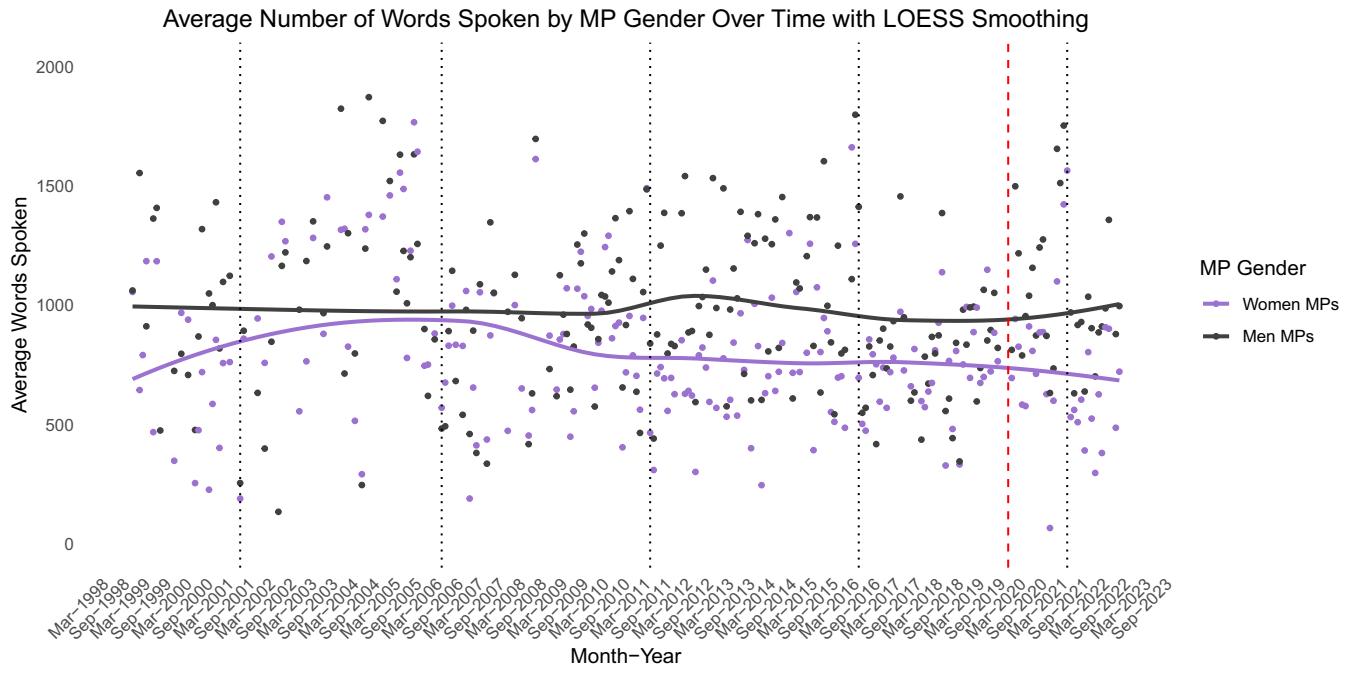


FIGURE 1 | Average words spoken over time by MP gender.

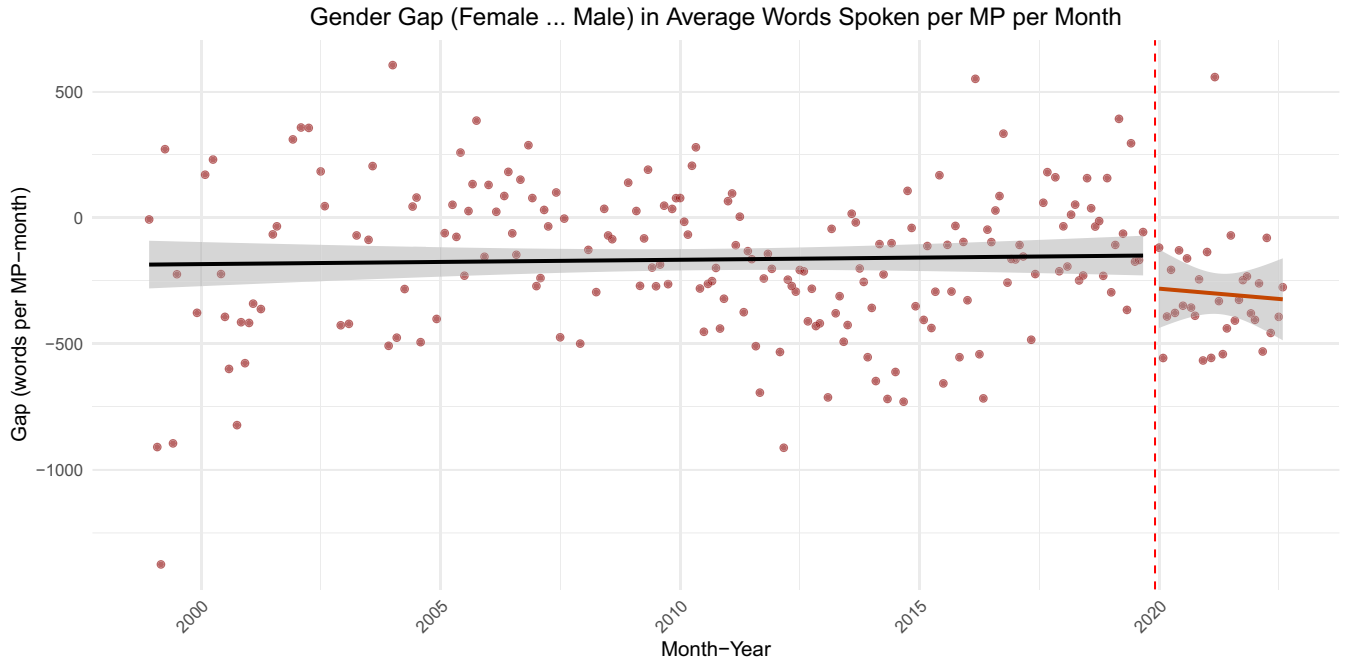


FIGURE 2 | Gender gaps in overall speech (average number of words spoken per month) before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

gender *gap* over time, with a dashed line indicating the start of the pandemic. The plot suggests that the negative gender gap (women consistently speaking less than men) widens further (becomes more negative) in the postpandemic period. To test this parametrically, we include an interaction term between MP gender and the post-COVID period (see Model 3 in Table SI.7). The estimated interaction term suggests that the gender gap widens by an additional 100 words, indicating a 60% increase in the post-COVID period ($p<0.05$). As shown in Figure 1, this occurs because men, on average, increase their speech volume, while women decrease theirs.

The analyses above include all MPs observed over the 25-year period. Next, we examine average changes among the subset of MPs who served both before and after the onset of the pandemic. To do so, we employ a generalized difference-in-differences design, similar to approaches used elsewhere to study gender-differentiated effects of the pandemic (see Bluhm et al. 2022). A key assumption of this modeling strategy is that trends in the behavior of men and women MPs were roughly parallel prior to the pandemic. Figure 1 shows some variation in the gender speech gap over time.[13] Despite these short-term fluctuations, the overall trends remain remarkably stable. An *F*-test of joint

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significance confirms that the gender gap in speech volume does not vary systematically prior to the onset of the pandemic (see Appendix S1, Section E).

We therefore proceed with a two-way fixed-effects model that includes both MP and month fixed effects. This specification allows us to capture average within-MP changes from the pre- to the post-pandemic periods, necessarily restricting the analysis to legislators who served during both periods, and providing a more stringent test of the pandemic's effect on gender gaps in speech volume. The interaction term remains negative and statistically significant (see Model 4 in Table SI.7, $p < 0.01$). The magnitude of the coefficient suggests that among the MPs who served both before and after the onset of the pandemic, the gender gap widened by approximately 230 words. Importantly, the prepandemic gender gap among these "stayers" was substantially smaller than in the full sample of MPs (≈90vs. 170 words). Thus, the pandemic produced an especially dramatic increase in inequality in this group, with the gender gap expanding by roughly 250%. While both men and women stayers increased their speech volume after the onset of the pandemic, men who served in both periods did so at a much greater rate than women (see Appendix S1, Section F).[14]

Taken together, these results indicate that women's overall legislative voice declined relative to men's after the onset of the pandemic. Depending on the sample of MPs included in the specification, as men's speech volume rose, women's levels either declined or grew much less dramatically.

This analysis supports the argument for male adaptation during crises, even in a public health emergency that nominally falls within a domain where women have a clear domain-specific advantage. Men doubled down on their authority, increasing their already established dominance in total speech volume. We now turn to the specific mechanisms that may underlie this pattern: the appropriation of public health as a newly masculinized domain, or the reframing of a multifaceted crisis in terms of its more masculine-coded dimensions.

5.2 | Men Do Not Claim Health Speech During the Pandemic and Quickly Turn to Different Topics

We first examine whether male elites adapted to the crisis by claiming the health domain as their own. If men sought to establish ownership over health as a newly salient policy area, we would expect them to increase their health-related speech relative to women. To test this, we use a supervised LLM approach to classify all parliamentary speeches from 1998 to 2022 by substantive topic. Specifically, we applied the OpenAI gpt-4o-mini model to code each speech, providing a structured prompt with predefined categories (see Appendix S1, Section C for the prompt wording). These topical categories were developed through an iterative process that combined inductive and deductive approaches. We first used structural topic models (STMs) on the entire corpus of parliamentary speeches to identify topics inductively, with various topic-count settings ($k = 5$–20). From this, we identified both the major domains of parliamentary debate and the topic areas with the biggest gender differences over time (see Appendix S1, Section D).

Using this approach, we derived seven topics that emerged frequently and consistently across legislative debates over time, including public health.[15] The model classified health speeches as those that topically pertained to subjects such as hospitals and clinics, disease outbreaks, public health, medicine and vaccines, health workers, and the provision of medical services. Importantly, while these speeches could pertain to COVID-19, we chose not to include COVID in the structural prompt. This decision allows the classification scheme to be applied consistently throughout the 25-year period and recognizes that pandemic-related speeches could concern multiple substantive domains, including public health, economic lockdowns, border controls, and security measures, among others.

Figure 3 shows how attention to public health in plenary debates has changed over time. The *y*-axis shows the share of speeches that public health accounts for (measured in words) out of the total speeches during that month (also measured in words) for men and women MPs, respectively.[16] Although not our primary focus, the figure also reveals a broader trend: attention to public health has increased substantially over the study period. At the turn of the century, health-related speeches accounted for less than 5% of all speeches. In the years immediately preceding the pandemic, they accounted for nearly 15%. This growth in public health's salience aligns with increases in women's representation during this period. Women also consistently speak more about health than men do. In models with the same controls that we have used throughout, women MPs devote approximately 3 percentage points more of their speech volume to health topics than men in any given month (Model 1, Table SI.8). Relative to men's average rate of 8.7%, this represents an increase of roughly 35%.[17] This pattern aligns with a central claim of our argument: women MPs hold a clear prepandemic advantage in the public health domain.

Next, we test an implication of the adaptive issue ownership tactic: whether men increase their health speech relative to women after the pandemic's onset. Descriptively, Figure 3 suggests that, intuitively, both men and women spoke relatively more about public health in the first months of the pandemic (recall the pandemic onset is indicated by the vertical dotted line). Women maintained their relative advantage in the total share of health speech in these initial months, and notably, men did not increase their share relative to women's levels. More strikingly, both men and women rapidly shifted their attention away from public health as the pandemic progressed, returning to roughly prepandemic levels despite the ongoing crisis. Regression results tell a similar story. A difference-in-differences specification shows that the average gender gap in health speech remained unchanged following the onset of the pandemic (see Model 2, Table SI.8).[18] Thus, while the pandemic temporarily increased attention to health among all MPs, it did not alter the relative distribution of health-related speech between men and women.

Taken together, these findings provide little evidence that male elites adapted to the crisis by claiming public health as their own. Thus, the widening gender gap in overall speech, as documented in Figure 1, cannot be explained by men entering and dominating the health domain.

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5.3 | Men Frame COVID Speeches as About the Economy and Security as the Pandemic Progresses

To analyze whether male elites reframed the pandemic around more masculine-coded issue dimensions, we focus specifically on speeches about COVID-19 and investigate how MPs characterized the crisis over time. As a first step, we identify all speeches that directly addressed the pandemic. For each speech delivered during the pandemic period, we used an LLM classifier to determine whether COVID-19 was the primary focus.[19] Figure 4 shows the share of monthly parliamentary speeches devoted to the pandemic, among men and women MPs. Intuitively, for both groups, attention to COVID-19 increased sharply in the first 6 months of 2020, peaking that summer when approximately 20% of all speeches directly concerned the pandemic.

Having identified the pandemic-related speeches, we next examine how MPs frame the crisis within this subset of speeches. Figure 5 presents the distributions of substantive topics within speeches primarily focused on COVID-19. Using the same classification scheme employed above (see Appendix S1, Section C), each pandemic-related speech was assigned to one of six substantive policy domains: health, governance, security, social welfare (including gender inequality), the economy, or education, with a residual category capturing procedural or other matters. Figure 5 shows how the substantive framing of the pandemic evolved over time; the *y*-axis shows the percentage of total pandemic speeches that address one of the six

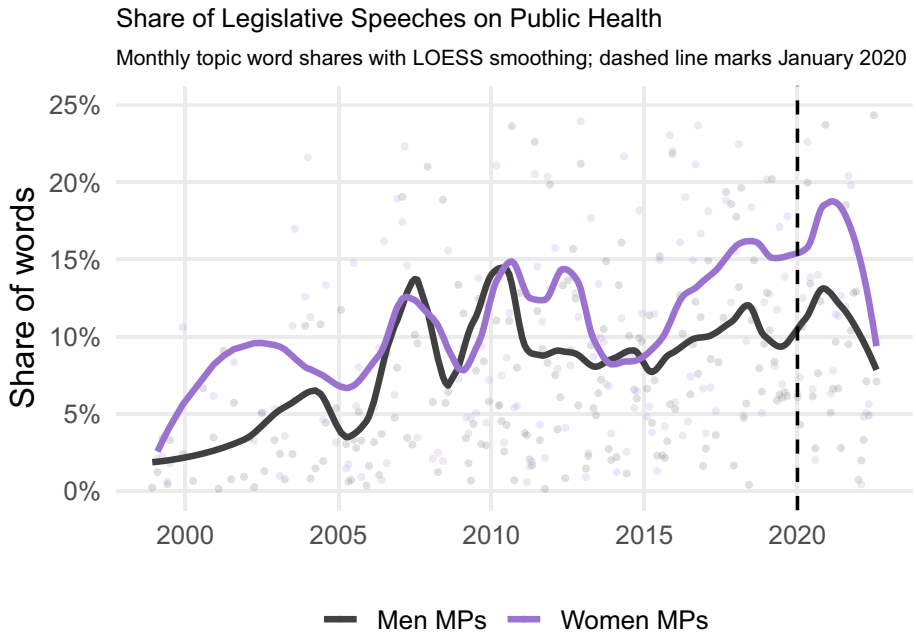


FIGURE 3 | Health speech as a share of total speech volume over time.

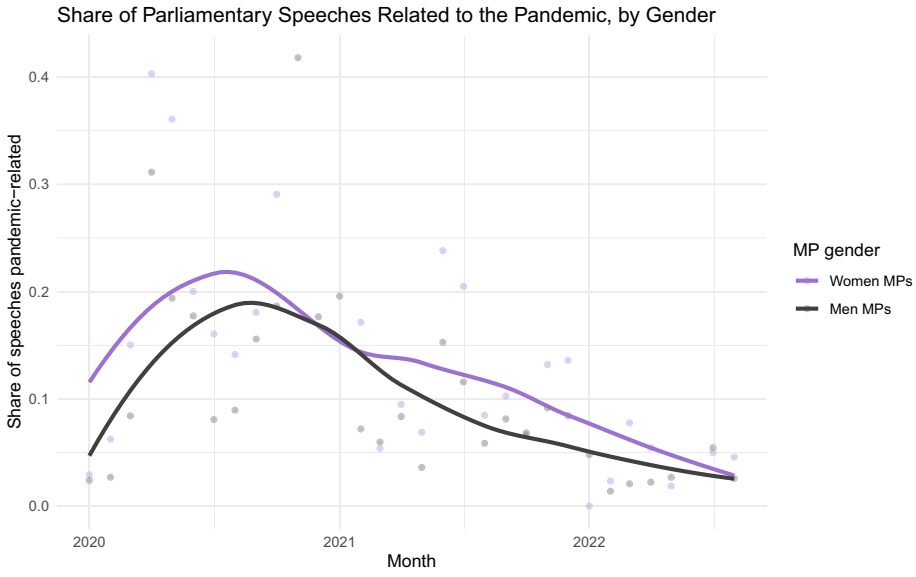


FIGURE 4 | Total share of COVID speeches in the postpandemic period.

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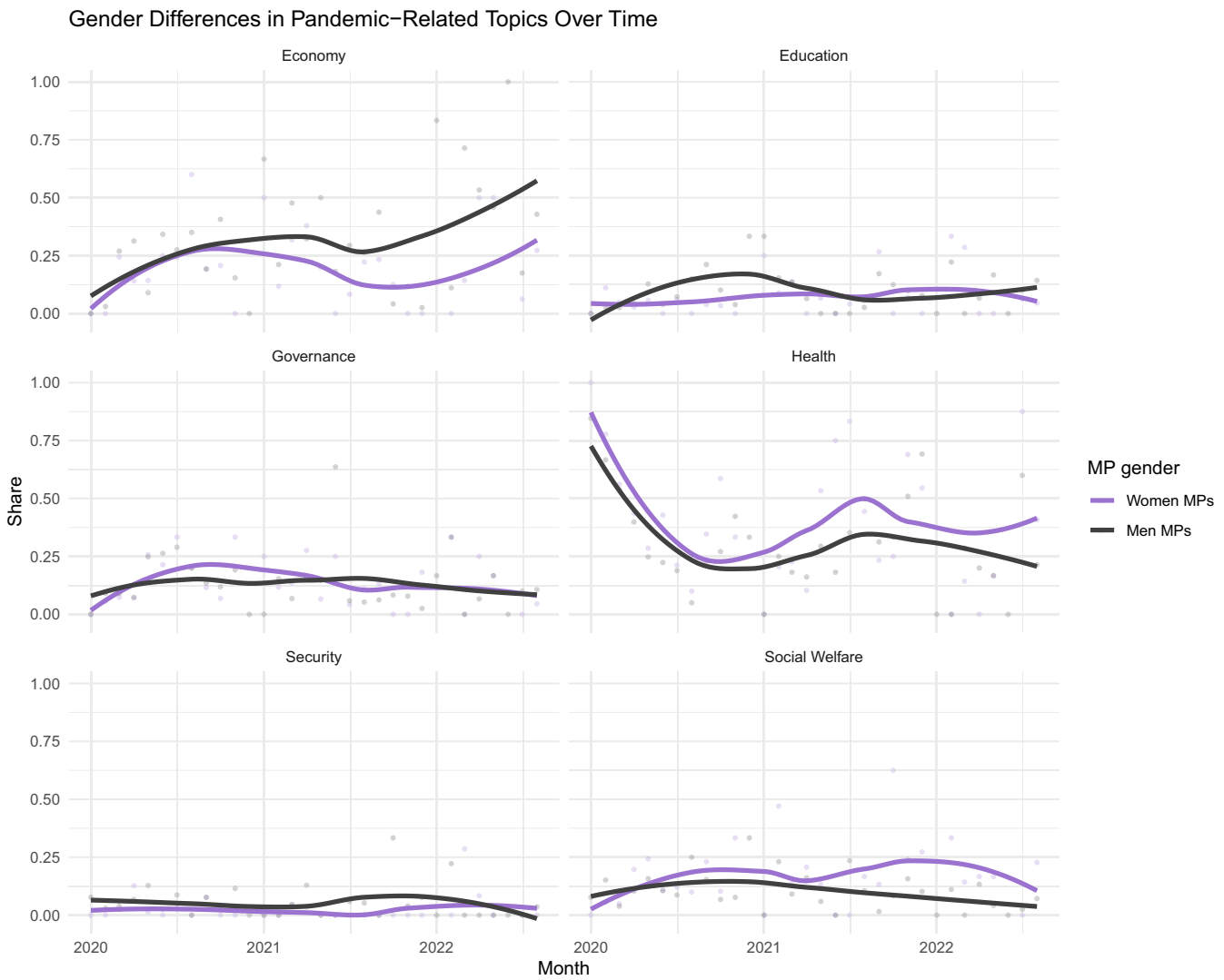


FIGURE 5 | Framing of the COVID crisis by men and women MPs over the pandemic's duration.

substantive topic frames (e.g., a value of 25 in the health graph means that 25% of pandemic-related speeches primarily addressed public health).

This analysis speaks directly to our theory of crisis reframing. Crises are not interpreted in a single, fixed way; rather, political actors can emphasize different dimensions of the same event to advance particular understandings of the crisis and appropriate policy responses. To illustrate this point, Table 1 displays representative texts from our corpus that exemplify each substantive framing. The examples highlight the considerable latitude MPs possessed in defining the meaning of the pandemic and, consequently, the kinds of political authority most relevant to addressing it.

Figure 5 reveals a clear shift in how MPs framed the pandemic over time. At the onset of the pandemic, public health was the most common frame for both men and women. By the fall of 2020, however, economic concerns had overtaken health as the most common way to discuss the crisis. Gender differences also became increasingly pronounced as the pandemic progressed. Although women remained more likely than men to frame the pandemic as a public health issue throughout the post-2020 period, men's attention shifted away from health more rapidly. At the same time, men's propensity to frame the pandemic in economic terms increased by mid-2020, making the economy their dominant frame thereafter. By the end of the period, economic concerns accounted for roughly half of all pandemic speeches delivered by men.

To further interrogate gender differences in crisis framing, Figure 6 presents coefficient estimates from a series of linear probability OLS models in which each of the six substantive topic frames serves as the dependent variable (i.e., the share of pandemic-related speeches that primarily concern that topic). The models includes controls for ministerial status, incumbency, party and month fixed effects, with standard errors clustered by MP. Consistent with the descriptive patterns shown in Figure 5, women MPs are significantly more likely to frame the pandemic in terms of public health and social welfare (including issues pertaining to gender equality), whereas otherwise-similar men MPs are more likely to emphasize the security and the economy dimensions of the crisis (also see Table SI.9 in Appendix S1, Section H). We note, however, that our findings for a shift toward security are more modest. This may reflect the pandemic's more salient strategic

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TABLE 1 | Representative texts.

Pandemic frame	Example text
Health	There has been rampant blood shortage and a number of children have lost their lives. You can imagine a general hospital lacking blood and referring a child to Mbale Regional Referral Hospital. —Hon. Ms. Sarah Achieng Opendi, July 6, 2022
Economy	I want us to critically analyze the challenges that were brought by COVID-19 ... Imagine a situation where you went to the bank, got a loan, built your house and got tenants. The banks have not forgiven you and you are supposed to pay. —Hon. Ruth S Nankabirwa, August 5, 2020
Education	The urgent matter is that students are on the streets and the girls are even more vulnerable because they have nowhere to sleep ... Given the situation of COVID-19, our students have suffered so much with education. —Hon. Betty Aol Ochan, September 14, 2021
Security	Nobody knew today that we would be having the coronavirus. ... For matters of security, we know what has been happening with our borders. ...we must prepare our army. They must be equipped. Therefore, the classified funding for the security sector must be increased. —Hon. Jackson Mbaju Kathika, April 22, 2020
Governance	It is upon the parties to decide which mode of elections is best for them. ... I am also aware that the current situation is not as bad as it was at the beginning in March. The situation is fairly improving and the general elections are going to take place. —Hon. Jesca Ababiku, July 9, 2020
Social Welfare	I would like to report to this House, sadly, that we have lost most of these children during the lockdown because they could not access food. —Hon. Lucy Achiro Otim, May 1, 2020

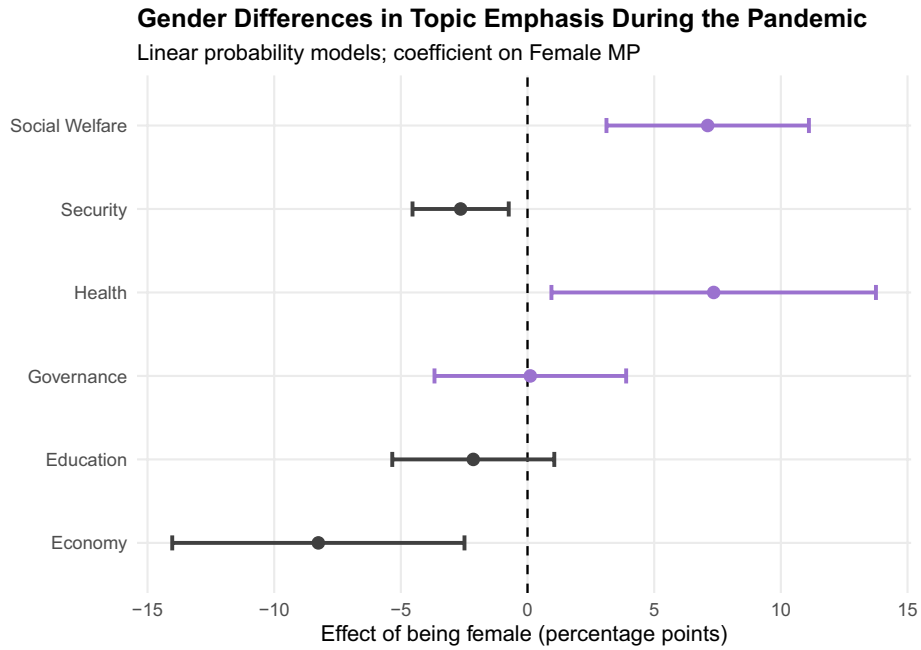


FIGURE 6 | Coefficient plots of MP gender for models that each of the six issue frames as a dependent variable.

framing in economic terms, consistent with the descriptive patterns in Figure 5, where gender differences in attention to security are less pronounced. Understanding how politicians prioritize among different domains of perceived expertise—and, in this case, why men more readily reframed the crisis in economic rather than security terms—is a valuable avenue for future research.

Taken together, these findings provide little evidence that men responded to the pandemic by taking over the public health domain. Instead, they increasingly framed the crisis in terms coded as masculine—the economy and security—rather than framing it in terms coded as feminine: public health and social welfare. The result was a gradual reorientation of pandemic discourse away from domains where women held a comparative advantage and toward domains more closely associated with men's established issue strengths. These findings offer strong support for crisis reframing as a tactic of elite male adaptation. Rather than competing with women within the public health domain, male elites appear to have preserved their influence by redefining the crisis itself.

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5.4 | Gender-Congruent Crisis Frames Driven by Ministers

In a final analysis, we examine which actors drive these shifts in crisis framing. Our theory suggests that adaptation should be evident among high-status political actors, who have the greatest incentives and capacity to shape the interpretation of unfolding events. We therefore estimate models that interact gender with ministerial status, a key indicator of prestige and influence in the Ugandan Parliament. Figure 7 presents the predicted probabilities for the two most common and consistently gendered pandemic frames—health and the economy—across four groups: male ministers, female ministers, male backbenchers, and female backbenchers. The results indicate that gender-congruent framing is concentrated among high-prestige actors. Women ministers are the group most likely to frame the pandemic in terms of public health, whereas men in ministerial positions are the most likely to emphasize its economic dimensions. The interaction term is positive and statistically significant for health ($p<0.05$), and negative and statistically significant for the economy ($p<0.01$, see Table SI.10 in Appendix S1, Section I). Thus, the overall decline in health-related discourse after the immediate onset of the pandemic reflects a shift in emphasis among influential male MPs toward traditionally masculine policy domains, while high-prestige women continue to focus on health. The pattern underscores the role of elite actors in shaping how crises are understood within legislative institutions and provides further evidence that crisis reframing was led by politically powerful men.

6 | Crises as Moments of Contested Power

Crises are often expected to unsettle male political dominance, opening space for women in arenas that men ordinarily control. Using a case in which patriarchy is entrenched but often contested, we find that the political opportunities seemingly created by a public health emergency were ultimately redirected onto terrain where men already held established advantages. The result was, paradoxically, an entrenchment of male elites' legislative dominance, reflected both in a widening gender gap in legislative speech and in men's growing ability to define the terms through which the crisis was understood.

Our findings suggest that crisis-induced elite adaptation may be an important mechanism through which gendered hierarchies persist despite apparent disruptions. At the same time, our analysis does not allow us to empirically distinguish between male elites' conscious strategic efforts to appropriate crises to preserve their power and more organic shifts rooted in existing gendered distributions of expertise, responsibilities, and issue commitments. Whether calculated acts or the activation of established gender roles, the empirical patterns of elite adaptation and the reproduction of gendered hierarchies are observationally similar. Future research employing process tracing, interviews, or other actor-centered approaches may be better positioned to adjudicate among these possibilities. Another important point of inquiry is understanding how long new patterns that emerge in the wake of crises persist, whether adaptation, as we have uncovered here, or transformation, as others have documented elsewhere. Our data contains a short period in which politics returned to normal after a prolonged crisis. Future work could examine whether the widening disparities in speech participation we document here have persisted to the present day, as well as how they affect the political handling of new crises in a similar issue area, such as the 2026 Ebola crisis in the region. Understanding the specific political fallout of pandemic politics seems all the more relevant as such events become increasingly common in a rapidly warming climate (Love 2026).

Our findings also lead us to ask: when do crises transform politics, and when do they instead entrench existing social

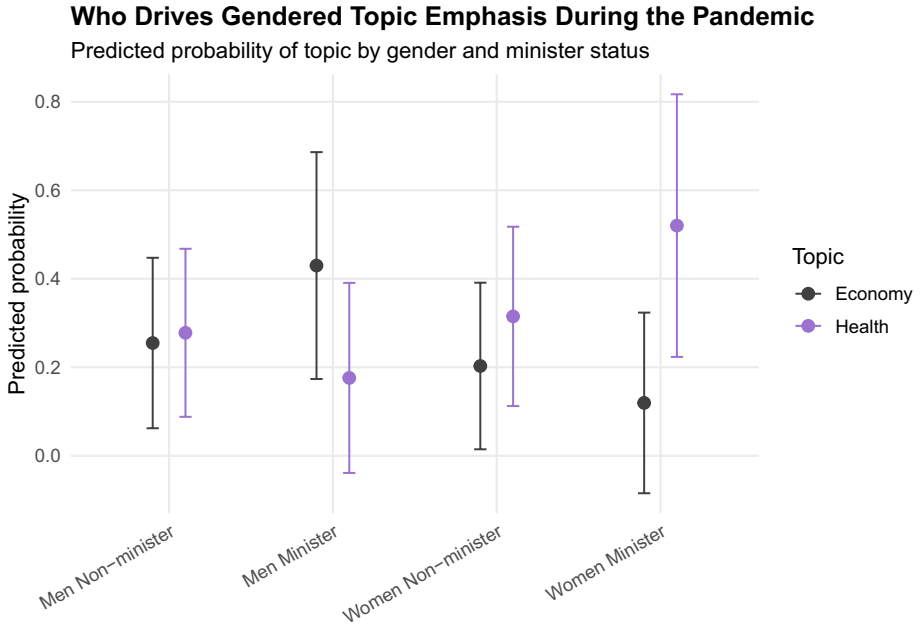


FIGURE 7 | Predicted values MP gender interacted with ministerial position for models that take the two most prevalent gendered issue areas (health and economy) as dependent variables.

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hierarchies in political power? Our study suggests that it is not enough for a crisis to occur within a policy domain conventionally associated with a marginalized group for that group to reap a political dividend. Tellingly, male MPs did not need to wrest public health away from their female colleagues to blunt the pandemic's disruptive potential. Instead, they merely changed the discussion to dimensions already coded as masculine. This points to a broader insight about how crises manifest in politics: crises rarely arrive with a single, settled meaning. Their interpretation is contested, and the power to define what a crisis ultimately is about is itself an important form of political power (see also Davidson-Schmich et al. 2026). Where competing interpretations of political events foreground policy domains that privilege different groups, actors are likely to favor the interpretations that align with their existing expertise and authority. This struggle over interpretation may be especially pronounced during crises, when the stakes of defining the terms of political debate are unusually high, and citizens demand visible leadership and decisive action. Under such conditions, crises may reinforce rather than disrupt existing hierarchies, even when they initially appear to favor groups that have traditionally occupied the margins of political power.

Moreover, successful male elite adaptation may be most likely when crises do not fundamentally alter the underlying distributions of political and economic power. It is possible that in Uganda (and perhaps more broadly), the COVID-19 pandemic did not sufficiently weaken incumbents' material or political advantages to cause a meaningful loss of power. More seismic societal transformations, such as genocide and war (Gaikwad et al. 2023; Tripp 2015), large-scale industrial decline (Clark et al. 2026), or major demographic shifts (You 2024) have physically removed male incumbents or hollowed out their economic base, leaving few reliable substitutes to restore the prior order. Under such conditions, existing hierarchies may become more difficult to reproduce because the foundations on which they rest have themselves been altered.

More broadly, our study reinforces a growing reorientation within gender and politics research: away from describing women's political underrepresentation and the barriers they face and toward understanding the incentives, strategies, and tactics through which men (and particularly male political elites) preserve their dominance (Griffin 2015; Josefsson 2024; Chauchard et al. 2025; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Valdini 2019). In doing so, we identify crisis-induced adaptation among male elites as one mechanism by which gendered hierarchies can persist despite apparent disruptions. Crises are particularly revealing events for studying these dynamics because they simultaneously create opportunities for change and incentives for adaptation. Our findings suggest that crises may also reveal the remarkable resilience of existing power structures.

Finally, the dynamics we uncover resonate with the growing global resistance to gains in gender equality. While the adaptation we observe is less overt than many forms of backlash, it similarly illustrates how moments that appear to threaten established power relations can generate responses that ultimately reproduce them. Understanding when political elites successfully adapt to moments of disruption—and when they fail to do so—remains an important area of continued study.

Acknowledgments

We thank Juan Manuel Pérez for excellent research assistance, and comments we received from the 2024 European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG).

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Ethics Statement

The underlying data—parliamentary transcripts—are historical and publicly available on the Ugandan Parliamentary website. No original data were collected for this study, and no institutional ethics review was required.

Data Availability Statement

Before publication, all data and code needed to produce the tables and figures included in this manuscript will be made available on the LSQ Dataverse.

Endnotes

[1] Women's increased presence in elected office is likewise associated with higher public health spending (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018) and improved health outcomes, particularly in low-income countries (Swiss et al. 2012).

[2] A crisis is "an external or internal event that disrupts the status quo, affects citizens' demands, and requires governments to respond while placing the careers of political actors or the survival of political institutions at stake" (O'Brien and Piscopo 2023, 892).

[3] This echoes insights from research on male elites' responses to gender-egalitarian institutional reforms, where they use creative and varied strategies to recoup, redirect, or contain the disruption these reforms produce (Bjarnegård 2013; Chauchard et al. 2025; Josefsson 2024; Karekurve-Ramachandra and Sood 2025; Krook 2016).

[4] The adaptation strategies discussed here are not exhaustive. Other responses to perceived shifts in gendered power relations may include more overt forms of backlash, such as harassment, violence, or the symbolic delegitimization of women political actors (Rachel E. Brulé 2020; Kim and Kweon 2022; Manne 2017; Mansbridge and Shames 2008).

[5] Male political leaders often benefit during crises associated with masculine policy domains, such as terrorism and national security, whereas women do not experience a comparable "rally around the flag" effect (Holman et al. 2022).

[6] Following the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in March 2020, the authorities banned public transportation, prohibited gatherings of more than five people, restricted private transportation, imposed a nationwide nightly curfew, closed national borders, closed schools, and ordered the closure of all nonessential businesses. The lockdown was partially lifted in June 2020 (Birner et al. 2021; Bose et al. 2023), but was reinstated in June 2021 for another 42 days. In January 2022, after nearly 2 years, the nightly curfew was lifted, and schools reopened (UNESCO 2022).

[7] In 1989, Uganda became one of the first countries in the world to reserve parliamentary seats for women (Tripp 2000). Since its introduction, the quota system has expanded substantially, nearly tripling the number of reserved seats and corresponding districts. At the same time, the total number of parliamentary seats has also grown.

[8] At times, women's advocacy has been dramatic: in 2013, UWOPA staged a high-profile standoff with President Yoweri Museveni,

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refusing to pass the national budget until he agreed to increase funding for maternal and neonatal health—an effort that ultimately succeeded (Muzee and Mbongo Épse Endeley 2019). The protest was sparked by the death of the 36-year-old coordinator of the Uganda Parliamentary Forum for Children, who died in childbirth (Clayton 2021).

[9] We use the terms "speech," "utterance," and "statement" interchangeably to refer to an enclosed piece of text that is preceded and followed by a different speaker.

[10] There are currently 146 districts reserved for women representatives. Within each district are smaller single-member electoral districts—known as constituencies, totaling 353 in which either men or women can run.

[11] On average, without controls, women MPs deliver 845 words per month, compared to 1050 for men.

[12] Uganda did not have political parties before 2006; thus, models that include party fixed effects exclude MPs who served before this time. The coefficient on gender is of similar magnitude and significance in both specifications.

[13] For instance, the gap nearly closed toward the end of the 2001–2005 parliamentary term, when several influential and outspoken women MPs held office—a pattern consistent with previous research documenting minor gender differences in legislative speech during this period (Wang 2014).

[14] The two largest political shocks in Uganda during the post-2020 period, beyond the pandemic itself, are the January 2021 general election and the May 2021 transition from Speaker Rebecca Kadaga to Speaker Jacob Oulanyah, which together mark the start of the 11th Parliament. In Supporting Information Appendix S1, Section J, we show that our results here and below are robust to excluding this period of political transition.

[15] The model coded each speech as primarily fitting into one of the following topics: public health, the economy, governance, security, education, social welfare (including issues of gender equality), or procedural matters/other. We validated the coding through iterative inspection of model outputs on a pilot sample of speeches.

[16] For completeness, we include similar plots for all substantive issue areas in Figure SI.10.

[17] As a robustness check, we also observe that women speak more about health-related topics than men when using the STM inductive coding of health speeches (with this coding, with MP-level controls, women speak almost twice as much about health issues as men; see Appendix S1, Section D.2).

[18] A Wald test suggests that the parallel assumptions trend holds to allow for a difference-in-differences framework ($p = 0.38$).

[19] To ensure reliability, we first conducted a pilot on a random subset of speeches to refine the prompt and verify coding behavior, including checks for parsing errors, category distributions, and consistency with existing keyword-based COVID measures.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** Supporting information. **Table SI.1:** Timeline of parliamentary operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Figure SI.1:** Unique active speakers per month by gender, 2018–2022. The shaded area marks the COVID pandemic period. **Figure SI.2:** Women's share of unique active speakers per month, 2019–2022. The shaded area marks the COVID pandemic period. The dashed line shows the prepandemic mean. Women's share remained stable at approximately 33%–37% throughout the restricted-attendance period, providing no evidence of systematic gendered exclusion. **Figure SI.3:** Expected topic proportions. **Figure SI.4:** Expected topic proportions, gaps by gender. **Table SI.2:** Representative texts. **Table SI.3:** Regression results on the proportion of health speech. The unit of analysis is each MP speech with standard errors clustered by speaker (MP). **Figure SI.5:** Marginal effect of gender on expected topic proportions. **Figure SI.6:** Predicted proportion of amount of speech by month that MPs dedicate to the topic of public health over the 25-year period in the dataset, by MP gender. **Table SI.4:** Female MP effect across topic-model specifications (k). **Figure SI.7:** K robustness. **Table SI.5:** Table 3 replication at the paragraph level. **Figure SI.8:** Paragraph robustness. **Table SI.6:** Regression of monthly word counts on gender, month fixed effects, and gender-by-month interactions in the pretreatment period. The F-test reveals the joint significance of the interaction terms. **Table SI.7:** Regression results on the quantity of speech. The dependent variable is the total number of words an MP speaks in a month. **Figure SI.9:** Change in the gender speech gap among MPs who served both before and after the pandemic. **Figure SI.10:** Gender gaps in six substantive topics in the pre- versus post-2020 era. **Table SI.8:** Regression results on health-related speech. The dependent variable is the share of an MP's monthly words devoted to health topics. **Table SI.9:** Gender differences in topic emphasis during the pandemic. **Table SI.10:** Gender, ministerial status, and topic emphasis during the pandemic. **Table SI.11:** Robustness check: total speech quantity (words per MP-month). Models 3 and 4 replicate the main analysis (Table SI.7), first on the full sample and then excluding the January–June 2021 transition period. The coefficient of interest (Female × Post-COVID, bolded) is stable across both samples. **Table SI.12:** Robustness check: gender gaps in COVID pandemic framing topics. Each cell shows the female coefficient from a separate `feols` regression with month fixed effects and party controls (replicating Table SI.9). All six coefficients maintain the same sign and significance pattern after excluding January–June 2021.

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