

A feminist promise? Gender equality in the rhetoric of Ursula von der Leyen

Abstract

The President of the European Commission plays a pivotal role in setting the agenda of the European Union. This is crucial for gender equality policy, given its horizontal nature. Gender equality policy requires coordination across multiple policy areas and navigation of often unclear competencies. Consequently, strong institutional leadership is essential to generate political momentum. Political speeches by the Commission President are a core instrument for setting the agenda and demonstrating commitment to an issue. Therefore, this article examines how the current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, framed gender equality policy during her first term in office, from 2019 to 2024. To understand how von der Leyen depicted gender equality policy, the article employs theoretical categories derived from concepts previously utilised by the European Commission. The analysis of the political speeches reveals a gap between the institutional ambitions of von der Leyen when she first became Commission President, as outlined in her initial inauguration speech, and the gender equality concepts advocated later. Overall, the initial rhetoric suggested a transformative and inclusive gender equality agenda, whereas later speeches on policy development tended to endorse more traditional ideas.

Keywords: Gender equality policy, intersectionality, Commission President, rhetoric, agenda setter, framing

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1. Introduction

The European Commission (the Commission) is the primary policy initiator in the European Union (the EU), and plays a vital role in setting the EU's policy-making agenda. With their growing significance as policy entrepreneurs and agenda setters, Commission Presidents play a key role within this institution (Kassim et al., 2017). The Commission President uses speeches as a key instrument to articulate and shape the broader agenda of the Commission (Müller, 2020). These speeches vary in scope, reach, and relevance, ranging from general addresses to more focused presentations of specific initiatives.

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The content of these speeches is particularly interesting in policy fields that require a strong agenda setter if they are to be included on the overall agenda of the Commission. While Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the gender mainstreaming article, obliges the EU to eliminate inequalities and promote equality between men and women in all its activities, gender mainstreaming horizontally across policy areas remains inconsistent (Ahrens, 2021). It demands coordination across multiple policy sectors and operates within a context of unclear competences (Abels et al., 2021), making its visibility on the agenda largely dependent on the initiative of the Commission President, who is the primary agenda setter (Ahrens & van der Vleuten, 2019). In this context, analysing whether and how a Commission President frames gender equality policy in their speeches helps to reveal their stance and, by extension, the underlying policy orientation of the Commission.

The current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, began her first term in 2019, making history as the first woman to hold this position. In retrospect, her first presidency has been portrayed as highly influential, since her policy priorities and strong agenda have significantly shaped the Commission's overall programme (Abels & Klöckner, 2025; Kassim, 2023). To assert her role within the EU, von der Leyen rhetorically presented herself, in her inauguration speech in the European Parliament, as a strong leader, signalling her intention to unite the institution around the cause of equality (Abels & Mushaben, 2020; Mushaben, 2025). In this context, the von der Leyen Commission promised to revitalise efforts to achieve gender equality within the EU. She proclaimed a "Union of Equality" (European Commission, 2020), raising high expectations among feminist policymakers and gender scholars (Abels et al., 2025).

The research question for this article is therefore the following: How did Ursula von der Leyen, as the figurehead of the European Commission, promote gender equality policy through her speeches during her first term in office? The article examines all the 429 official speeches she delivered during her first term, starting with the inauguration speech on 27 November 2019 and ending before her re-election by the European Parliament on 18 July 2024. The analysis relies on a heuristic of gender equality policy concepts to classify the content of her speeches. The aim of this article is to deconstruct the gender narratives in von der Leyen's political discourse. The initial findings suggest a contrast between her agenda-setting speech as President-elect and her later rhetoric in which gender equality policy is often framed in more traditional terms, particularly regarding women in the workforce.

The article is organised as follows. The next section concentrates on von der Leyen's series of speeches in terms of agenda-setting. In the theoretical section, a heuristic of gender equality policy concepts is identified within the historical development of gender equality policy, both in the academic literature and in the Commission's policy-making practice. After a quantitative analysis is conducted to determine the

frequency of different forms of gender equality policy mentioned in the speeches, a qualitative content analysis is performed to examine these policy conceptions. The conclusion discusses the relevance of the traditional perception of gender equality policy, which von der Leyen predominantly promoted, for the overarching objective of gender equality.

2. The Commission President as agenda setter, speeches as indicators

Commission Presidents exercise political leadership within an institution that holds a formal monopoly to propose legislation in the EU. They strategically navigate political opportunities and leverage institutional structures. A “strong entrepreneurial” (Müller, 2020, 213) Commission President is not merely an administrator but an active agent who mobilises resources, engages proactively across institutional boundaries, and sets the agenda (Müller, 2020).

In this context, presidential speeches have become a crucial instrument for strategic agenda-setting in executive politics. Once considered to be routine technocratic interventions, speeches are now widely recognised as high-profile political acts. Through these speeches, Commission Presidents aim to shape public discourse, to assert leadership within the EU’s institutional framework, and to signal policy priorities to Member States, stakeholders, and EU citizens. Thus, speeches serve both symbolic and strategic functions (Kassim et al., 2017; Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

Political speeches can be categorised in a variety of ways depending on the institutional setting and the purpose of the analysis. Three central dimensions are essential for understanding the function of presidential speeches in agenda-setting: scope, reach, and relevance (Condor et al., 2013; Müller & Tömmel, 2022; Reisigl, 2008). **Scope** refers to the breadth of the agenda addressed in a speech. Some speeches focus on a specific policy issue or initiative, while others present a broader, more comprehensive political agenda. The inaugural speech and the annual State of the Union address are prototypical examples of the latter, as they are designed to outline the Commission President’s overarching political vision (Pansardi & Battagazzorre, 2018). **Reach** concerns the intended audience of the speech. While some addresses target specific institutional or stakeholder groups, others are directed at a broader public audience, thereby expanding their potential influence within and beyond EU institutions (Müller & Tömmel, 2022). **Relevance** refers to the political significance and context of the speech, including its prominence in public discourse and political debate (Van Dijk, 1997). Grand agenda-setting speeches are particularly valuable for analysing the Commission President’s programmatic intentions. However, precisely because of their broad and often symbolic nature, these speeches tend to provide limited insight into the practical implementation of policy measures. For example, they rarely reveal the extent to which cross-cutting

approaches, such as a horizontal gender mainstreaming strategy, are incorporated into specific policy actions.

In the case of the Commission President, the three dimensions enable five types of speech, varying considerably in scope, reach, and relevance, to be distinguished. Building on the work of Müller and Tömmel (2022), who classify presidential speeches according to topic and venue/audience, this article refines their typology by broadening the *scope* parameter to better capture agenda-setting functions, and by adding *relevance* as a third analytical dimension to capture the political significance and contextual impact of presidential speeches, as these are not fully reflected in *scope* and *reach* alone. The following refined typology of presidential speeches is therefore used in this study (the reader should note that potential overlaps between speech categories are omitted due to a delineation of the dimensions of scope, reach, and relevance within the context of the agenda-setting power of the Commission President; see Table 1):

General agenda-setting speeches are characterised by their broad thematic scope, high political relevance, and wide intended audience (ranging from EU institutions to the general public). These speeches, such as the inaugural speech or the annual State of the Union address, are designed to outline the President's overarching political vision and to legitimise the Commission's agenda.

Policy-specific speeches focus on concrete policy initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, and primarily address expert or stakeholder audiences, including national ministries, civil society organisations, and regional authorities. The aim of these speeches is to provide political direction, while also contributing to professional discourse around implementation.

Ceremonial speeches are characterised by their limited scope, as they do not address specific policy initiatives but instead serve a symbolic purpose. Delivered on occasions such as public events or award ceremonies, these speeches typically aim to engage a broad audience, including civil society, cultural groups, and the general public. In terms of relevance, these speeches mainly hold symbolic significance rather than having a substantive policy impact. Nonetheless, they play an important role in fostering public trust and enhancing the visibility of the EU leadership within the broader European community.

Representative speeches are delivered in diplomatic contexts with the primary aim of representing European values, promoting strategic interests, and fostering international cooperation. Their scope typically includes broad geopolitical or value-based themes rather than detailed policy content. The reach of these speeches extends to foreign parliaments, heads of government, and the international public, positioning the Commission President as a diplomatic actor on the global stage. In terms of relevance, these speeches carry significant political weight externally,

serving to project the EU's normative power and enhance its visibility in global affairs, while also reinforcing internal cohesion around shared principles.

Press statements are reactive in nature, and their aim is to clarify the Commission's position in times of uncertainty or crisis. They have a narrow and precise scope, and their reach includes the media, the general public, and relevant political or diplomatic actors, reflecting the need for the broad dissemination of timely information. While their relevance may be limited in long-term agenda-setting terms, such speeches carry significant short-term political weight, particularly in moments of crisis, as they serve to reassure audiences, shape public perception, and maintain institutional credibility.

3. Conceptualisation of gender equality policy in speeches

To analyse the way in which gender equality policy was addressed in von der Leyen's speeches during her first term as President of the Commission, it is essential to define this phrase. The term *gender* itself has a broad range of uses, from emphasising women to a synonym for the sociodemographic category of sex, or a socially and historically constructed set of relationships (Celis et al., 2013; Lombardo et al., 2017; Verloo, 2005). Gender equality policy encompasses the array of political measures, strategies, and discourses through which gender is recognised as a social and political category. It includes the way in which institutions prioritise gender issues on the political agenda, translate concepts of gender roles and relations into policy areas, and utilise tools to shape social, economic, and political structures along gendered lines (Lombardo et al., 2017). Gender equality policy ideally takes the intersectional diversity of individuals' social, economic, and cultural identity into account, with the aim of reducing or eliminating underlying gender-based hierarchies and inequalities in both private and public spheres. Since the early 2000s, the concept of gender equality policy has expanded to encompass broader gender+ equality approaches that tackle cross-cutting forms of discrimination and inequality, including those affecting LGBTQI* communities (Eigenmann et al., 2024; Mazur & Engeli, 2023).

Based on the gender literature and the Commission's political practice, five distinct conceptualisations of gender equality policy can be identified, reflecting how the Commission has approached the issue over time (Kugelmeier López, 2025). These categories have evolved chronologically, mirroring broader developments in feminist theory and EU gender policy-making (Ahrens & Kantola, 2025; Hartlapp et al., 2021; Jacquot, 2015; Verloo, 2005). Although in practice they are often applied simultaneously, the conceptualisations are analytically distinct. In this study, they are used as a heuristic to uncover the underlying principles, objectives, and strategic aims of policy designs.

Equal treatment means that women and men have the same rights. The legal position is that there is no difference between them as they are officially equal. This

involves existing inequalities being addressed through legislation, and individual citizens being held accountable for exercising their formal equal rights. The male norm is the standard to which women are expected to conform.

Equal opportunities involves providing equal conditions for women and men, with the aim of achieving equality in outcomes and addressing unequal starting points. An equal opportunities policy seeks to reduce the disadvantages faced by women, particularly those women already active in the labour market. The focus is on ensuring that women have equal access in public and private life through compensatory policies such as positive action or positive discrimination.

Equal impact aims to achieve the same societal status for women and men. This concept emphasises the creation of equality through policy design (formulation) by considering societal structures in all policies. In this case, the gender equality policy aims to transform societal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities, to broaden the promotion of equality beyond just employment, and to integrate gender issues into mainstream policies.

Anti-discrimination refers to the absence of all forms of discrimination. All marginalised and non-mainstream groups are treated as being equal to mainstream groups, and are protected from social exclusion. In the EU legal context, this is reflected in the following provision: “In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation” (TFEU, 2012, Art. 10.).

Intersectionality refers to the elimination of systems of inequality that affect individuals across multiple, interconnected social categories. Women, as a diverse group, may experience overlapping layers of discrimination based on multiple factors, including race, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or migration status (European Commission, 2020).

These definitions will serve as the benchmark for the type of gender equality promoted in the speeches. The methodology will measure both quantity and quality.

4. Methodology

This article examines both the extent and the content of von der Leyen’s gender equality policy agenda. It uses a descriptive analysis of all 429 speeches delivered by von der Leyen.

First, these speeches were organised into the typology of speeches outlined in section 2, based on their scope, reach, and relevance.

Second, the frequency of 37 gender-related codes was measured across the speeches. These codes were derived from the conceptual framework. All analyses and visualisations were performed using R (version 4.5.1; 2025), with packages such as

pdftools, dplyr, tibble, purrr, stringr, textstem, and writexl. For the plots, packages such as ggplot2 and lubridate were used. To account for different grammatical forms of the same word, lemmatisation was applied. By reducing words to their root forms, known as lemmas, lemmatisation helps to standardise text. For example, *women* is reduced to its base form *woman*, allowing all related forms to be analysed together. Since the analysis was carried out across three languages; English, German, and French; special methodological considerations were necessary. Von der Leyen occasionally switched languages within a single speech, and lemmatisation is less reliable for German and French because of their complex inflectional systems. Therefore, the author cross-checked the output by searching for inflected variants using `stringr::str_detect()` to ensure that all relevant forms were included.

All terms were subsequently manually checked for plausibility in the context of gender equality policy. For instance, the word *Frau* in German was often used as a form of address rather than as a gender reference, and those instances were therefore manually excluded from the coding. Similarly, phrases such as equal treatment can only be partly considered as they also appear in non-gender-specific policy contexts, such as: “And trust in equal treatment for the manufacturing companies.” (von der Leyen, 2022d). Thus, contextual indicators were considered, as nearly all terms may be operationalised in different ways depending on the context of the speech.

Statements in which von der Leyen referred to her personal experiences, for example, as a mother of seven or as a working wife, were excluded. In addition, internal institutional measures, such as references to the Commission being the “the first gender-balanced College in the history of the European Commission.” (von der Leyen, 2023g), were not coded, as the focus was on policy-oriented rather than organisational aspects. Furthermore, references to topics such as migration, religion or age were not coded unless they were explicitly linked to the operationalised forms of anti-discrimination or intersectionality. Speech headings and titles were also excluded from the coding process. To cover all forms of discrimination, the forms of discrimination mentioned in Article 10 of the TFEU and the “Union of Equality” (European Commission, 2020) were used. The codebook also included the additional code *gender-based violence*, which was identified in an open category during the coding process.

A corpus of 95 speeches referencing gender equality policy was identified, providing insights into the frequency and context of these references. The gender equality conceptualisations were crossed with the speech categories. Temporal analysis was also carried out to investigate whether gender equality policy was especially prominent during specific periods, either related to particular initiatives or as part of wider communication strategies within the electoral cycle. This method underscores the broader political strategies and initiatives connected to gender equality policy.

Third, the 95 speeches were structured so that all principles of gender equality were treated equally, allowing an assessment of the meaning behind specific terms.

The qualitative coding in this section of the article was performed manually and deductively, with the main focus on policy intention and policy initiatives. In this way, the measurements reflect the nature of gender equality policy in terms of policy affiliations and connections to EU competences.

The methodology described above will be used to structure the discussion below, beginning with the classification of von der Leyen’s speeches into general agenda-setting speeches, policy-specific speeches, ceremonial speeches, representative speeches, and press statements.

5. Promoting gender equality: How often, what kind of speeches, and when?

Von der Leyen’s 429 speeches in her first term as Commission President serve various communicative purposes, each with its own scope, reach, and relevance. The following table summarises the categorisation and lists the number of von der Leyen speeches in each category.

Table 1: Classification of von der Leyen’s speeches by number and percentage of cases

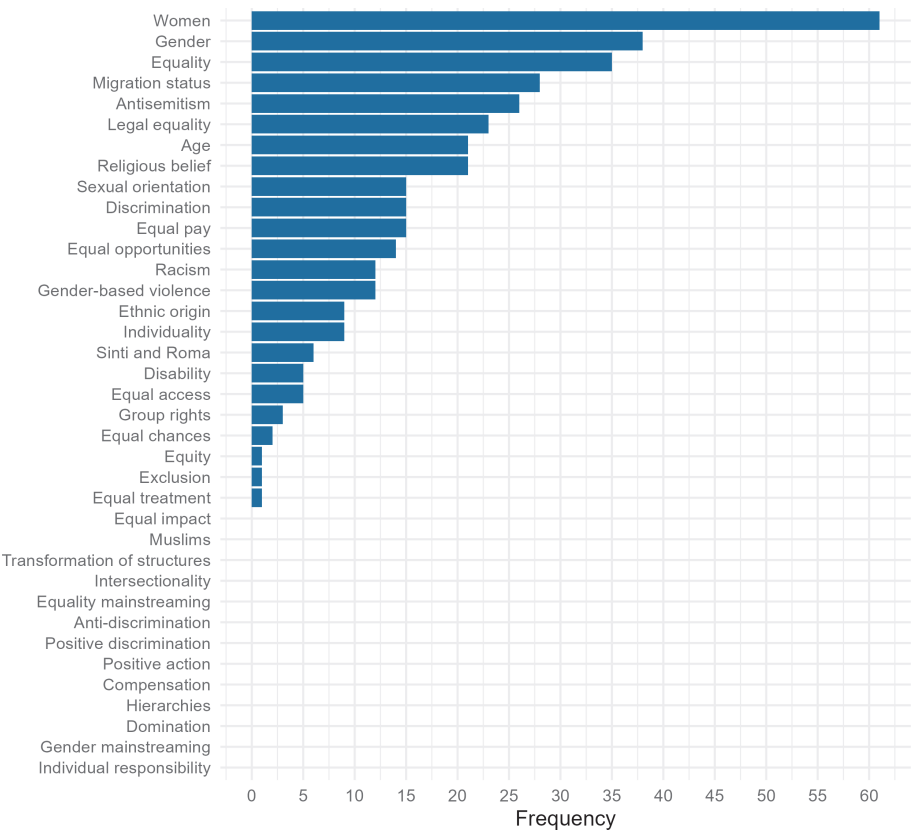
Type of speech	Scope	Reach	Relevance	Number/429 speeches
General agenda-setting	Broad thematic scope	European Parliament, EU citizens	High political relevance, legitimization, agenda-setting	5 1.17 %
Policy-specific	Concrete policy initiatives, concrete decisions	Experts, national ministries, EU institutions, civil society, regional authorities	Specific agenda-setting, expertise sharing, professional discourse	160 37.30 %
Ceremonial	Limited, symbolic scope	Civil society, cultural groups, general public	Symbolic significance, fostering trust, enhancing EU visibility	123 28.67 %
Representative	Broader geopolitical scope, value-based themes	Foreign parliaments, heads of government, international public	High external political relevance, projecting EU’s normative power, strengthening cohesion	123 28.67 %
Press statement	Narrow and precise scope, reactive	Media representatives, public, diplomats	Short-term political relevance, reassurance, clarification, maintaining institutional credibility	18 4.20 %

Source: 429 von der Leyen speeches, 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>

Out of the 429 speeches analysed, 95 contain at least one reference coded as being related to gender equality policy. In most of these 95 cases, a single speech includes several coded segments rather than just one isolated mention. This means that, in

quantitative terms, approximately 22.14 % of the 429 speeches address gender equality policy to some extent. Among these 95 speeches, 23 explicitly refer to the term gender and there are 38 references in total, while the remaining references concern specific policy aspects of gender. The term most frequently coded was woman, including all variations such as mother and female, listen in the appendix. This term was used a total 421 times. Most frequently, it appeared in the speech presenting an award to the Iranian Women Life Freedom movement at the M100 Media Award 2023 (von der Leyen, 2023a), where it was mentioned 43 times. The word woman was mainly used in connection with equal work for equal pay or descriptions of violence against women.

Figure 1: Number of speeches containing gender-related word groups



Source: 95 gender-related speeches of Ursula von der Leyen 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>. Generated with R Studio.

Graph 1 shows the number of speeches in which specific word groups appear. Each count indicates how many speeches contain at least one inflected form of a given term or its linguistic equivalents. For example, 61 speeches by von der Leyen include at least one inflected form of mother, woman, or female, or a corresponding term in French or German. For clarity, one representative word from each group was selected for Graph 1 to stand for the entire group. This is also reflected in the bold words in the appendix, which correspond to these selections.

The total number of words used in von der Leyen's 95 speeches is provided in the appendix. By contrast, the following terms did not appear in the speeches overall or in connection with gender equality policy: Muslim, transformation of structures, intersectionality, equality mainstreaming, anti-discrimination, equal impact, positive discrimination, positive action, compensation, hierarchies, domination, gender mainstreaming, individual responsibility.

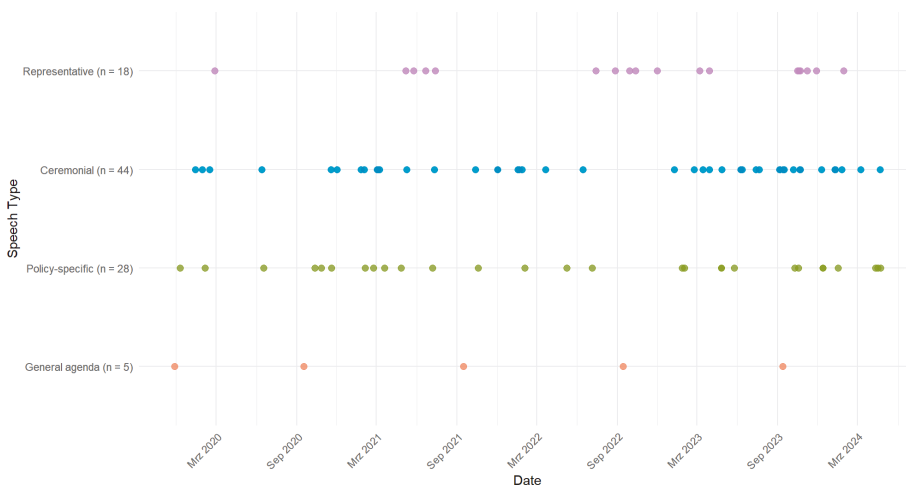
In terms of speech settings, gender equality policy is absent from the press statements, none of which contain any gender-related references. Among the policy-specific speeches, 28 contain references to gender equality policy. Speeches on von der Leyen's flagship policy initiative, the European Green Deal, do not refer to gender equality policy. By contrast, all speeches in which one would expect some attention to gender contain at least some engagement with the concept; see, for instance, her speech at the high-level conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights (von der Leyen, 2024a). In speeches with an overall theme not directly related to gender, references to gender tend to appear only when they are connected to the main topic. For example, von der Leyen (2022b) remarked: "Take gender equality, for example: Having access to sanitation and hygiene at home and at school is especially important for women and girls. It protects them against gender-based violence and provides privacy and dignity." Another notable example is von der Leyen's opening speech at the ETUI-ETUC Conference: Towards a New Socio-Ecological Contract (von der Leyen, 2021a). This speech addresses the topics of women at work and equal pay, engaging a wide range of stakeholders involved in the European market economy and discussing policy for a future economy. Explicit mentions of the term gender within policy-specific speeches are rare, occurring only four times.

Gender equality policy is prominent in all general agenda-setting speeches, albeit to varying degrees. It is strongly present in ceremonial speeches, with 44 instances. In representative speeches, there are 18 instances (Graph 2).

Finally, the presence of references to gender equality policy varies over time, partly overlapping with the timing of specific speeches. General agenda-setting speeches appear at fixed intervals because of their structured nature. Representative speeches addressing gender equality policy tend to cluster around these general agenda-setting speeches, indicating a close temporal and substantive connection between the two types. By contrast, ceremonial and policy-specific speeches do not exhibit

notable clustering. Instead, they are distributed more evenly throughout the years, with each speech appearing to be relatively independent of the others.

Figure 2: Occurrence over time of speeches with references to gender equality policy



Source: 95 gender related speeches of Ursula von der Leyen, 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>. Generated with R Studio.

6. Policy intention, policy initiative: What kind of gender equality?

Based on the initial analysis, the conceptualisation of gender equality for policy formulation is examined in this section. Generally speaking, innovative concepts such as intersectionality or gender mainstreaming do not occur in any of von der Leyen's speeches. To some degree, speeches that are more policy-oriented refer to different groups of people who experience discrimination, but these cases do not reflect a comprehensive understanding of intersectionality. The most dominant concept is equal opportunity, referring to the role of women in relation to work and motherhood, and how women can be encouraged to participate in the workforce. The category with the most policy initiatives and the strongest policy intention is anti-discrimination.

Besides the theoretically derived frames, the connection between women and violence in conflicts, or women/gender-based violence, is especially identified in two State of the Union speeches, three policy-specific speeches, and seven ceremonial speeches.

The term *gender-based violence* appears twice in the corpus, and, in both cases, the references remain generic, with no attached policy initiative. The phrase *violence against women* is, in contrast, the more politically anchored concept. In her 2021

plenary speech, von der Leyen stated: “Violence against women and children is a crime. We must call it a crime and it must be punished as such. This is why I want the EU itself to join the Istanbul Convention. This remains a priority for my Commission” (von der Leyen, 2021c). This shows the concrete intention of the Commission. Additionally, she highlighted the global influence of women’s rights movements to protect women from violence (von der Leyen, 2023a).

6.1 Equal treatment

This section addresses the conceptualisation of gender equality policy in terms of equal treatment, with coded segments including the following phrases: women’s rights, equal rights, *legal equality*, *individuality*, and *equal treatment*. A substantial proportion of these passages consist of generic statements. These statements articulate general principles or normative claims, but do not outline concrete measures or evaluate specific outcomes. Illustrative examples include the connection between the Covid-19 pandemic and women’s rights (von der Leyen, 2020a) and the link between equal rights and equal access to care and careers (von der Leyen, 2022a).

What is interesting about this gender equality policy category is that it does not stand alone. Every time words from this category are mentioned, they are combined with words from another category. In particular, when policy initiatives are named, equal treatment appears in the same paragraph as equal opportunities or anti-discrimination.

For instance, regarding policy intention, von der Leyen states her aims, emphasising that equality and anti-discrimination are fundamental democratic values and that the EU is committed to upholding these principles.

“In a democracy, everyone must enjoy equal rights and opportunities. [...] For instance, the European Union has launched a new push for equality in the workplace; with equal pay for equal work, so that women earn the same as their male colleagues; or with a Child Guarantee, so that all families can afford childcare; or with a fair minimum wage, so that all workers can enjoy a decent living. We also set out a new initiative against racism, and anti-Semitism and strategies for the rights of persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ equality. That is the unique strength of democracy. Democracies deliver opportunities, for all.” (von der Leyen, 2023b)

Another example is found in the EU’s 2020 Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion, and participation, which is a structured initiative offering specific measures and institutional support for Roma communities.

“Even the most entrenched prejudices and discriminations can be eradicated, if public authorities and civil society work together with a shared sense of direction, towards equality and equal rights. This is why in 2020, we put forward a new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation.” (von der Leyen, 2023c)

Legislation to increase the number of women on the boards of major European firms, and the first-ever EU law to end violence against women, exemplify measures with tangible and measurable outcomes (von der Leyen, 2024b). In relation to

policy evaluation, President von der Leyen highlights progress in advancing equality and women's rights, noting that "in these three years, the European Commission has launched a new push for equal rights across our Union" (von der Leyen, 2023d) and "in the last five years, we have taken unprecedented action for women's rights in Europe" (von der Leyen, 2024b), including equal pay legislation, increasing the number of women on boards, and the first European law against violence toward women. These statements report concrete results and achievements, illustrating the effects of prior policy measures. She evaluates the challenges and risks, including the assessment of a judicial ruling in Poland that "calls into question the foundations of the European Union" (von der Leyen, 2021b), which underscores the potential impact on judicial independence and the protection of citizens' rights. While much of the focus is on women's work, von der Leyen also stresses equal treatment for all: "They wanted the rule of law and for everyone to be equal before the law" (von der Leyen, 2021d).

6.2 Equal opportunities

This category contains the highest number of coded segments, with terms such as *women*, *mother*, and *female* appearing most frequently. Dedicated speeches also specifically address women as a group.

Generic statements often emerge when discussing women, emphasising differences as opportunities arising from diversity, and thereby framing diversity as an asset. Women are also recognised as different from men: "Not because women are better than men per se. But they are different" (von der Leyen, 2020a).

Policy intentions primarily focus on addressing the balance between work and family across different sectors. In her speech at the 2020 Women's Forum Global Meeting, President von der Leyen emphasised that post-crisis recovery measures must ensure that women have the same opportunities as men, with a particular focus on digital skills and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. Investments are directed towards encouraging more girls and women to enter STEM fields, which dominate green and digital job sectors. Currently, 41 % of scientists and engineers in Europe are women (von der Leyen, 2020a).

Concrete policy initiatives operationalise these intentions. One instrument mentioned is the Directive on Pay Transparency. Initially introduced as part of a policy proposal to address the gender pay gap and the gender employment gap, the Directive is repeatedly highlighted as a key legislative tool to put into practice the idea that "equal work deserves equal pay" (von der Leyen, 2023e). It is presented both as a forthcoming measure and, later, as a legally binding act. This demonstrates how proposals can evolve into binding legal instruments within the EU policy cycle. Other examples include the Women on Boards Directive, which addresses gender representation in leadership and was introduced after ten years of stalemate (von der Leyen, 2024a).

6.3 Equal impact

The terms *gender* and *equality* appear in the speeches, but their usage differs in depth and function, ranging from broad normative claims to concrete policy references. For the word *gender*, generic statements occur most frequently. President von der Leyen often gives credit to various institutions or addresses general concerns; however, concrete deliverables are less frequently specified. As she emphasises: “Because gender equality does not just ‘happen’. Progress is hard won and easily lost. Even in countries where there are no morality police. True equality requires daily attention and commitment” (von der Leyen, 2023a). Policy initiatives appear three times in the speeches, particularly at the start of her mandate, with specific references to the Istanbul Convention and the “Union of Equality” (European Commission, 2020), the new gender equality programme of the Commission. Policy intentions, including the Gender Equality Strategy, are mentioned three times, signalling planned actions and strategic priorities, while policy evaluations occur twice, reflecting assessments of progress and effectiveness. Generally, her claim that “this is what we are working on: putting women at the centre of all our policies” (von der Leyen, 2021e) seems interesting when set alongside the fact that she never uses the phrase *gender mainstreaming*.

6.4 Anti-discrimination

This section examines the conceptualisation of gender equality policy in relation to anti-discrimination, with reference to concepts such as *discrimination*, *equal chances*, *exclusion*, *equity*, and *group rights*. Dedicated speeches address issues concerning Roma communities, antisemitism, racism, and migration.

Although this category does not represent the largest share in terms of word count, it contains most of the concrete policy initiatives, proposals, and evaluations. These include the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC; von der Leyen, 2020c) and the Framework Decision on combating expressions of racism and xenophobia (2008/913/JHA; von der Leyen, 2020c). Both the Directive and the Decision address direct and indirect forms of discrimination. The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (von der Leyen, 2021f) and the EU Roma Strategy (von der Leyen, 2023c), which aims to reduce the Roma employment gap and the early childhood education participation gap by 2030, are further examples of such initiatives. Furthermore, specific initiatives are often seen in combination, and address LGBTQI* rights, the renovation wave aimed at making cities greener, the rights of persons with disabilities, increased accessibility for all, and ways to combat racism.

“In these three years, the European Commission has launched a new push for equal rights across our Union. New initiatives against racism and to foster minority rights. Strategies for LGBTIQ equality and the rights of persons with disabilities. And a renovation wave to make our cities not just greener but more accessible to all” (von der Leyen, 2023d).

Additional initiatives include cooperation tools like the high-level group on combating racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance, as well as the European Network of Equality Bodies (von der Leyen, 2020c). She also addresses the rule of law, backed up by the European Charter of Human Rights.

“Likewise, Europe is rising up against discrimination. It is written in black on white in our European Charter of Human Rights. We will never accept EU funding going to countries that do not respect the principles of this Charter. We are implementing all our legal instruments to block EU funds to countries or regions that discriminate against LGBTIQ individuals or any other minority. Because Europe is Equality. And Europe is Diversity. This is why we are also fighting for respect for the rule of law and for judicial independence in particular. The lack of judicial independence undermines the very foundations of our democracies. It is a long and difficult struggle, but a struggle that is indispensable.” (von der Leyen, 2023f)

Policy proposals include the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (von der Leyen, 2020d), proposals to extend the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime including those based on race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation (von der Leyen, 2020e), the first European strategy to combat antisemitism (von der Leyen, 2022c), the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (von der Leyen, 2023b), and proposals to strengthen LGBTIQ* rights, including mutual recognition of family relations across the EU (von der Leyen, 2020e). These proposals are intended to guide future legislative and programme development and to ensure a long-term, rights-based approach across the Union. She highlights evaluations of national Roma strategies, praising successful initiatives while identifying areas where further work is needed (von der Leyen, 2023c). Retrospective assessments also include reports on the implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan and the Anti-Semitism Strategy, and measures to protect minority rights (von der Leyen, 2023d).

6.5 Intersectionality

The analysis of von der Leyen’s speeches shows that she does not explicitly mention *intersectionality*; however, her discussions of gender equality touch on themes related to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and include references to diversity. In her inauguration speech, von der Leyen (2019) introduced Helena Dalli as the EU’s first Commissioner for Equality; Dalli was tasked with advancing the EU’s equality agenda and serving as a key figure in dismantling barriers that restrict individuals on the basis of their identity, beliefs, or relationships.

She emphasised that “People care about fairness and equality in every sense of the word” (von der Leyen, 2019), already indicating a general understanding of the importance of addressing all forms of inequality and the general approach needed to combat them. Some speeches do address specific groups experiencing discrimination. For instance, she noted that: “Female and youth employment is too low – we all know that you cannot build a successful economy without youth and women” (von der Leyen, 2020b). She indicated in some speeches that equality needs to go beyond men and women, and that other categories of inequality also

need to be recognised: “When we speak about respect and dignity we must not only speak about men and women. This question is bigger than gender. We cannot allow LGBT-free zones to spread in our Member States” (von der Leyen, 2021c). This leads to the overall impression that, when she names more than one category or explains that people can face several forms of discrimination, she is urging the Union to take action. Otherwise, these references typically appear in combination with policy proposals targeting particular groups, such as the Roma strategy. Generally, intersectional or multi-category statements occurred six times throughout the speeches. Nevertheless, the explicit naming of groups and their overlapping social categories does not fully meet the standards of an intersectional approach.

7. Discussion

What overall picture emerges from this analysis, and what direction is indicated by von der Leyen’s speeches? The findings suggest several key observations regarding the framing and implementation of gender equality policy under her leadership.

First, the comprehensive anti-discrimination and women in the workspace acquis primarily derives from the EU’s core competences (Ahrens & van der Vleuten, 2019; TFEU, 2012, Art. 10.) Therefore, most policy initiatives are visible in areas in which the EU holds explicit authority. This implies that promoting gender equality is not, in itself, an EU policy competence, but must be adequately considered when designing policies in other domains.

Second, gender equality policy is typically addressed only when it is contextually appropriate or when a specific event requires it. Gender is not consistently mainstreamed across all policy areas. While it features regularly in speeches on equality and women’s issues, references in other domains remain limited and are often framed in general or rhetorical terms rather than embedded in concrete policy measures. Notably, gender is absent from speeches on the European Green Deal, which represents von der Leyen’s flagship initiative. However, several speeches focus on women in the workplace or highlight different forms of discrimination or violence against women as their central themes. This observation is consistent with earlier analyses that conceptualise gender as a foundational myth in the EU (MacRae, 2010), whereby commitments to gender equality are deployed strategically, often without corresponding substantive policy support.

Third, von der Leyen’s discourse relies heavily on the language of anti-discrimination, and repeatedly frames women as a category distinct from men. In this respect, she largely follows the approach of previous Commission Presidents, such as Jean-Claude Juncker and José Manuel Barroso, who mainstreamed equality policy primarily through anti-discrimination measures rather than through a transformative gender equality agenda (Ahrens, 2023; Hartlapp et al., 2021).

Fourth, von der Leyen's rhetoric does not explicitly address either intersectionality or gender mainstreaming. Regarding intersectionality, while her discourse occasionally addresses intersecting inequalities, it does so without explicitly naming or theorising them. It seems that there are significant barriers not only to incorporating intersectionality into policy but even to using the term itself (or a descriptive equivalent). The usage is often vague, falling short of the theoretical expectations of intersectionality, and typically refers only to a specific form of anti-discrimination (Eigenmann et al., 2024). This is a weakness of the approach; as a result, intersectionality remains implicit and underdeveloped. The absence of gender mainstreaming is even more striking. Given that gender mainstreaming is embedded in Article 8 of the TFEU (Ahrens, 2021), the complete omission of it from von der Leyen's rhetoric raises essential questions. If gender mainstreaming is the key policy instrument for integrating a gender perspective across all policy areas, its absence suggests a shift away from a structural, horizontal approach to gender equality towards a more isolated understanding. This omission is significant, as it indicates changing priorities in the EU's future gender equality strategies and a weakening of gender mainstreaming as a policy instrument within EU governance. Significantly, the issue extends beyond the well-documented implementation failures of gender mainstreaming; it begins at the discursive level, with the absence of gender mainstreaming in political rhetoric itself (Cavaghan, 2017). Consequently, her approach remains firmly rooted in the first- and second-wave conceptualisations of gender equality and does not engage with the third- or fourth-wave perspectives that foreground structural power relations and intersecting forms of inequality.

Fifth, von der Leyen's approach reflects her personal style and political positioning. Unlike policy documents such as the European Gender Equality Strategy which are developed through inter-service consultations and adopted by the College of Commissioners, her speeches are her personal responsibility and reflect her rhetoric. She could have used terms such as intersectionality or addressed gender issues horizontally across policy areas. Her speeches suggest that she approaches gender equality from the perspective of a conservative politician from Germany's Christian Democratic Party. This reading is further supported by the broader political context of her re-election, in which a strong European People's Party in the European Parliament played a central role; gender equality policy featured only marginally in these negotiations (Abels & Klöckner, 2025). Taken together, her personal rhetoric seems aligned with her party's priorities as a member of the leading parliamentary faction. This suggests that her selective engagement with transformative gender equality frameworks is a conscious reflection of her alignment with the priorities of the European People's Party, demonstrating that she chooses to ensure that her personal rhetoric follows the party line.

Sixth, concepts such as equal treatment often appear in the same paragraph as equal opportunities or anti-discrimination, suggesting that the terms build on one another or interleave, making it unclear which term is meant in a given context.

This indicates a certain flexibility or ambiguity in von der Leyen's rhetoric regarding gender terminology.

Seventh, the selective appearance of specific concepts in certain speech categories raises important questions. It indicates that von der Leyen's use of gender-related terminology may be strategic, reflecting the audience, context, or rhetorical goals of a given speech (Müller, 2020). The absence of references to gender equality in von der Leyen's speeches labelled as press statements may lead to the assumption that these issues are not prioritised in public messaging in this format. However, gender equality is addressed in other types of speeches, suggesting that the prioritisation of these issues varies depending on the communicative context rather than being universally neglected. While further research could benefit from the examination of document types beyond speeches, such as press releases, the present analysis of press statements classified as speeches made by von der Leyen indicates an absence of gender-related references.

Eighth, the fact that gender equality, even though it is not central to all policy areas, appears in about 22.1 % of all speeches is certainly significant. What is more interesting is the type of gender equality policy that has been promoted. The absence of certain terms or concepts in speeches suggests that these issues are not prioritised on the public agenda.

8. Conclusion

Commission Presidents exercise strategic political leadership within the EU, leveraging their formal monopoly to propose legislation. They act not merely as administrators but instead as active agents who mobilise resources, engage across institutional boundaries, and set the policy agenda, with their speeches being key instruments for communicating this agenda (Kassim et al., 2017; Müller, 2020). In this setting, speeches are highly individual forms of exercising leadership, with women leaders engaging more than men in highly-skilled speechmaking (Müller & Pansardi, 2022).

Von der Leyen has been recognised as a capable and strategic leader, effectively exercising her leadership powers with varying impact across key policy areas (Mushaben, 2025). At the start of her first term, her inaugural address to the European Parliament presented gender equality as a renewed priority, framing it as a unifying objective for the institution and underscoring the significance of her role as the first woman to lead the Commission. It was against this background that the von der Leyen Commission's pledge to build a "Union of Equality" was made (European Commission, 2020).

The analysis of Ursula von der Leyen's speeches during her first term as President of the Commission reveals a notable contrast between her initial feminist promises and the more traditional framing of gender equality policy that followed. While

her inaugural address signalled ambition for a transformative equality agenda, her subsequent rhetoric focused primarily on women's participation in the labour market, equal pay, and anti-discrimination measures, policy areas closely linked to the Commission's formal competences. Innovative approaches, such as gender mainstreaming or intersectionality, remained absent from her discourse. Women were often framed in relation to motherhood or as distinct from men, rather than as part of a broader structural analysis of inequality. Gender equality policy thus appears not to be an independent priority. Overall, von der Leyen's rhetoric reinforces first- and second-wave notions of equality, equal treatment and equal opportunities, while largely sidestepping more comprehensive, transformative approaches. Under her leadership, the gender equality policy appears constrained, retreating to formal competencies and limited engagement, and it is notably absent from flagship initiatives. This indicates that her presidency has promoted gender equality within the scope of EU competencies, although it has fallen short of advocating a truly feminist agenda.

The study has some limitations. The categorisation of speeches could have varied if additional dimensions beyond scope, reach, and relevance in the context of agenda-setting had been included. Similarly, focusing solely on von der Leyen's speeches rather than other document types, such as statements or press releases, restricts the scope of the analysis. Future research examining these other document types would therefore be very beneficial. The qualitative nature of the analysis means that the researcher's interpretation influences the results, and such potential bias should always be acknowledged. Further research could be carried out on the second von der Leyen Commission, which commenced in December 2024. Analysing gender equality in von der Leyen's speeches from that period becomes particularly intriguing, given the evolving EU institutional landscape.

This article leads to a broader question: why does von der Leyen speak about gender equality in the way she does? Ultimately, von der Leyen bears responsibility for the political messages conveyed in her speeches. Rhetorical leadership is a core dimension of political agency, and speech-making remains one of the most direct instruments through which a Commission President can signal priorities and articulate commitments. Certainly, successive crises (such as COVID-19) constrained her rhetorical space. However, even within a structurally constrained setting, von der Leyen was able to establish a dedicated portfolio across a variety of policy fields, including the European Green Deal, during her first term. Further, rhetorical leadership remains one of the few domains in which the Commission President enjoys substantial autonomy. The argument here is not that von der Leyen could have delivered a fully fledged feminist agenda under these conditions, but rather that the narrowing of her rhetorical trajectory cannot be explained solely by institutional or political constraints. It reflects a substantive downgrading of gender equality as a guiding narrative, marking a notable departure from the transformative vision she articulated upon taking office. The von der Leyen Commission has been

characterised by a highly centralised leadership style (Abels & Klöckner, 2025), which delegates implementation while retaining strategic direction at the top. In this context, her rhetorical choices should be understood as political decisions rather than mere structural inevitabilities, even if the European political climate has shifted further to the right, making ambitious equality agendas more difficult.

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Appendix

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