

Radio silence: Gender in the rhetoric of Ursula von der Leyen's second term

Zusammenfassung

Funkstile: Gender in der Rhetorik von Ursula von der Leyens zweiter Amtszeit

Im Dezember 2024 trat Ursula von der Leyen ihre zweite Amtszeit als Präsidentin der Europäischen Kommission an. Aufbauend auf ihrem Gleichstellungsprogramm aus der ersten Amtszeit kündigte sie an, sich weiterhin täglich für die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter einzusetzen. Doch was steckt hinter diesem Versprechen? Da Rhetorik zu den wenigen Bereichen zählt, in denen die Präsidentin über erhebliche Autonomie verfügt und in denen sie ihr Engagement für ein bestimmtes Thema unter Beweis stellen kann, stellt sich die Frage, ob und wie sie sich in ihren eigenen Worten für Geschlechtergleichstellung einsetzt. Dieser Artikel führt eine zweistufige Analyse aller Reden und Stellungnahmen von der Leyens aus der Anfangsphase ihrer zweiten Amtszeit durch und untersucht, wie Gender in verschiedenen Formen verwendet werden. Die Analyse zeigt, dass die Präsidentin kaum noch geschlechterbezogene Begriffe verwendet und wenn doch, sind ihre Ausführungen oberflächlich und lassen Maßnahmen vermissen. Sie ignoriert Themen wie Behinderungen, LGBTQI+-Rechte und Intersektionalität und trägt damit zur Entpolitisierung von Geschlechterfragen bei, da diese zunehmend von ihrer Grundlage der strukturellen Ungleichheit losgelöst, durch Marktlogik neu gefasst und somit ihres Zwecks beraubt werden.

Schlüsselwörter

Ursula von der Leyen, Europäische Kommission, Gleichstellung, Rhetorische Führung, Entpolitisierung von Gender

Summary

Ursula von der Leyen's second term as President of the European Commission began in December 2024. Building on her first-term gender equality programme, she pledged to continue the daily work for gender equality during her second term. However, what lies behind this promise? Since rhetorical leadership is one of the few areas in which the Commission President has significant autonomy and can demonstrate commitment to a particular issue, the question arises as to whether and how she commits herself to gender in her own words. This article conducts a two-step analysis of all of von der Leyen's speeches and statements from the early part of her second term, examining how gender is used in various forms. It shows that she no longer uses gender-related terms, and when she does, her discussions are superficial and lack concrete actions. She is blind to issues like disabilities, LGBTQI+ rights, and intersectionality, thus contributing to the depoliticisation of gender as it is increasingly removed from its basis in structural inequality, rephrased through market logic, and therefore losing its purpose.

Keywords

Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission, gender equality, rhetorical leadership, depoliticisation of gender



1 Introduction

Gender issues have increasingly encountered opposition within the European Union (EU). Anti-gender movements and governments, including the former Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán and the newly elected centrist-populist president of the Czech parliament Tomio Okamura, who holds the third highest position in the state, openly voice their aversion towards equality policies. In their rhetoric, gender equality is actively being instrumentalised and politicised to promote a right-conservative agenda (Maglietta 2025). This trend is also evident in the right-wing shift that has now reached the core institutions of the EU, with the European Parliament showing significant changes since the June 2024 elections (Abels/Klöckner 2025).

Consequently, although gender equality is officially enshrined as a core European value (European Union 2012a), it is increasingly treated as a discretionary policy area, with specific issues emphasised or overlooked depending on ideological priorities (Szkuta 2025). Amid the right-wing pushback in the EU (Müller 2025), one of the most influential agenda-setters, Ursula von der Leyen – re-appointed as European Commission President – has promised a strong start to her second term in advancing gender equality (von der Leyen 2024a). In one of her most important agenda-setting speeches for her second term, during the plenary debate on the new College of Commissioners and its programme, she promised: “We will never stop fighting for equality” (von der Leyen 2024b). However, research on von der Leyen’s first-term rhetoric shows that she tends to overlook gender in her speeches during times of crises and distress for the EU (Müller 2025).

How is gender framed in von der Leyen’s second-term rhetoric? This article evaluates the frequency and context of gender-related rhetoric in her second-term speeches. As her second term is ongoing, only the rhetoric from the first year can be analysed. However, the first year in office is crucial for establishing political priorities and shaping the broader policy landscape (Kugelmeier López 2025). A total of 117 speeches and 59 statements delivered between 18 July 2024 and 1 December 2025 are analysed, covering her president-elect phase to the end of her first year in office.

The findings reveal that von der Leyen rarely discusses gender, and when she does, her references remain superficial and lack concrete implementation plans. Gender largely remains symbolic, and topics such as disability, intersectionality, or gender mainstreaming are absent from her discourse. When these topics are mentioned, they refer to the market and financial situation without involving a human-centred narrative, suggesting a depoliticisation of the issue in her political rhetoric.

The article is structured as follows: The first chapter focuses on political rhetoric and the first von der Leyen Commission, particularly the use of gender in her speeches. The second chapter conceptualises gender within the Commission, outlining key terms that could potentially appear in von der Leyen’s rhetoric (Ahrens 2018; Jacquot 2015). The subsequent methods section describes the two-step analysis employed in this study: a quantitative analysis of speech and statement segments indicating where gender can be identified, and a qualitative analysis of what has been said. Finally, the findings are discussed and interpreted to demonstrate the patterns and variations in her second-term rhetoric on gender.

2 Gender in Ursula von der Leyen's rhetoric

Research on gendered rhetoric in the EU is extensive. A key strength of this literature lies in its focus on how political actors frame, or fail to frame, gender and gendered identities (Kantola 2022; Müller/Pansardi 2023; Reinhardt/Heft/Pavan 2024) across various EU institutions. Recent work has further explored the rhetorical (non-)resistance to the right-wing backlash against gender highlighting the importance of key EU leaders' rhetorical commitment to promoting the EU's position in accordance with its values (Lombardo/Rubio Grundell 2025).

Therefore, the Commission President's rhetoric is an interesting subject to analysis. Since José Manuel Barroso's tenure (2004–2014), the Commission's increasing presidentialisation has become more apparent. This trend is reflected within the Commission itself, where Commission Presidents assume more prominent political responsibilities, including setting the agenda and acting as policy entrepreneurs (Abels/Klößner 2025; Kassim et al. 2017), given the institution's near-monopoly over agenda-setting (Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021). In agenda-setting, political rhetoric is a key tool for communicating priorities and signalling commitment to specific topics (Müller 2020). Speeches are one of the few domains in which politicians enjoy substantial autonomy, particularly when addressing areas within the EU's remit (Otjes/Louwerse 2021). They operate on two levels: first, as expressions of the Commission President's institutional role (Müller 2020), and second, as performative acts through which the Commission President not only communicates individual priorities and convictions but also strategically positions themselves in the political arena (Kanwal/Maldonado García 2019). Thus, with the increasing presidentialisation of the Commission, the President's framing of policy issues becomes even more influential than that of other political actors (Kassim et al. 2017) and provides a distinctive lens for assessing their strategic choices and priorities (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020).

The analysis of von der Leyen's rhetoric has been the subject of extensive study, yielding numerous conclusions about her stance on core EU values (Lombardo/Rubio Grundell 2025; Müller 2025; Müller/Tömmel 2022). Research into von der Leyen's speeches on gender equality during her first term (2019–2024) reveals distinct patterns. Of the 429 official speeches analysed, 95 contain gender-related terminology, meaning such references appear in 22.1 per cent of her overall output. These references occur across various types of speech, including general agenda-setting, policy-specific, ceremonial, and representative addresses (Kugelmeier López 2026), indicating sustained engagement with the issue across different institutional contexts. More specifically, von der Leyen consistently aligns gender equality initiatives with established EU competences, particularly in areas such as anti-discrimination. She notably avoids newer feminist terminology such as *intersectionality* and the policy instrument of *gender mainstreaming*, thereby omitting a concrete instrument for advancing gender equality within EU policymaking (d'Agostino 2024; Kugelmeier López 2025). This framing situates gender-related topics within legally and politically appropriate domains, suggesting a strategic awareness of the EU's constrained mandate in this field. In her first-term speeches (2019–2024), von der Leyen outlined commitments to advancing gender equality, including the appointment of a new Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli

(von der Leyen 2019). She highlighted her “critical actorness” (Abels et al. 2025: 17) by citing achievements such as equal pay legislation, an increase in women on corporate boards, and the introduction of the first European law against violence towards women, in a speech on International Women’s Day (von der Leyen 2024c).

At the same time, her earlier second-term rhetoric included commitments such as striving for gender parity in the College of Commissioners again, which she explicitly emphasised during the plenary debate on the new Commission (von der Leyen 2024b). However, this ambition was not realised, as the formation of a gender-balanced College ultimately failed due to insufficient nominations by the member states (Abels/Klößner 2025). This highlights the structural constraints on the Commission’s capacity to deliver on such commitments.

These developments suggest a pragmatic, possibly depoliticised approach to gender in von der Leyen’s speeches that is limited to a legal mandate and influenced by political shifts and core policies. As a result, gender issues may be seen as peripheral rather than transformative.

3 Gender over time in the EU

The European Commission’s political practice reflects five conceptualisations of gender equality that have emerged alongside contemporary feminisms (Ahrens 2018; Jacquot 2015). Understanding these evolutions is crucial for identifying possible operationalisations of gender in von der Leyen’s second-term rhetoric, as they are also evident in her first-term rhetoric (Kugelmeier López 2026).

Equal treatment: Women should have the right to claim equality. In the 1960s, the first wave of feminism in Western Europe emerged, mainly influenced by the liberal feminist idea of equal rights (Jacquot 2015). It led to the development of legal mechanisms to address inequalities. The EU’s commitment began in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome. Notably, Article 119 established the goal of equal pay, making it the first EU article to promote equality between men and women. Despite early implementation challenges, this article laid the foundation for the Commission to address inequalities between men and women (Ahrens 2018).

Equal opportunity: Women should be compensated to create equal conditions for them as members of the group *women*. In line with this idea, the Commission introduced policies based on positive discrimination and positive actions, offering financial incentives (Ahrens 2018). The focus shifted from merely rights to addressing the gap between legal equality and actual societal equality. The second feminist wave focused on developing an understanding of women as a group that is free of disadvantages by virtue of their membership (Jacquot 2015). One of the main focuses at this time was women’s participation in the workforce and the unpaid domestic labour they carry out (Lombardo/Meier/Verloo 2009).

Equal Impact: Addressing inequality by challenging structural barriers. The third wave introduced gender as a social construct, shifting the focus from equal treatment to a broader perspective (Jacquot 2015). The EU marked this shift with the gender mainstreaming article, a treaty provision without direct enforceability, as the European Court

of Justice cannot base cases on it (Ahrens 2021). Without enforceable directives, the Court could view gender mainstreaming as soft law (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020). The significance of gender mainstreaming lies in addressing inequalities through policies before they emerge, going beyond mere legislation.

Anti-discrimination: The aim is to eliminate all forms of discrimination (Kugelmeier López 2025). Following the turn of the century, the EU began to prioritise gender equality alongside other equality issues such as those relating to ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation. Under TFEU Art. 10 (European Union 2012b), the EU committed itself to ensuring equality in this area. Alongside intersectionality, it is a recent addition to discussions of gender equality and efforts to fight discrimination and promote diversity (Lombardo/Meier/Verloo 2009).

Intersectionality: The recognition and elimination of all forms of systemic inequality that influence individuals across multiple interconnected social categories. The fourth wave of feminism is evident in the Union of Equality (European Commission 2020). However, it has been criticised for its limited analytical depth and for a superficial use of the concept, with gender remaining the primary frame of reference (d'Agostino 2024).

During the first von der Leyen Commission, several flagship policy initiatives were launched demonstrating different ways of operationalising gender (European Commission 2024). For example, the Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Directive (EU) 2024/1385) explicitly addresses intersectional and structural discrimination. The Pay Transparency Directive (Directive (EU) 2023/970) focuses on equal treatment for men and women and mentions intersectional discrimination. Finally, the Directives on Equality Bodies (Directives (EU) 2024/1499 and 2024/1500) promote equal treatment and aim to combat both general and intersectional discrimination.

4 Methodology

I conducted a two-level analysis of all speeches and statements made by von der Leyen during her second term as President of the Commission. This covers the period from her candidacy statement and subsequent re-election by the European Parliament on 18 July 2024 through to the end of her first year in office on 1 December 2025.

To analyse all speeches and statements that constitute oral interventions, a definition was applied that requires addressing a specific audience and being delivered in a defined venue (Müller/Tömmel 2022). Speeches and statements available on the Commission website were identified as the document types that meet these criteria.

I then filtered by the relevant timeframe, speaker (Ursula von der Leyen) and document type (speech or statement) to find all relevant documents. Additionally, I applied three exclusion criteria to ensure that only relevant statements were retained. Jointly issued statements were removed to focus exclusively on von der Leyen's own rhetoric, and statements in which she was not the actual speaker, such as written statements issued on behalf of the Commission as an institution, were discarded. Very brief statements without a clearly defined audience were also excluded, as they do not qualify as substan-

tive oral interventions. In total, 117 speeches and 59 statements were retained.¹ A total of 176 rhetorical interventions were analysed.

I used R/RStudio to search for specific codes derived from the gender theoretical framework. This enabled me to filter out gender-related terms and to process all speeches and statements. As von der Leyen delivers her speeches and statements in three different languages (English, German and French), the search terms were translated to ensure inclusion in all languages. To account for word variations (equal→equality→equals; and further), I employed lemmatisation, which reduces words to their base forms (lemmas). I did not include terms that are strictly related to securitisation in my search strategy, as the focus of the article is on gender. I manually confirmed the significance of these words with respect to gender. The process was organised as follows: First, I identified where and in what forms gender-related terms appeared in speeches and statements. Second, I conducted a qualitative analysis of all remaining oral interventions. A list of the codebook, including its German and French translations, can be found in my article (Kugelmeier López 2026).

5 Promoting gender in rhetorical interventions: Frequency and context

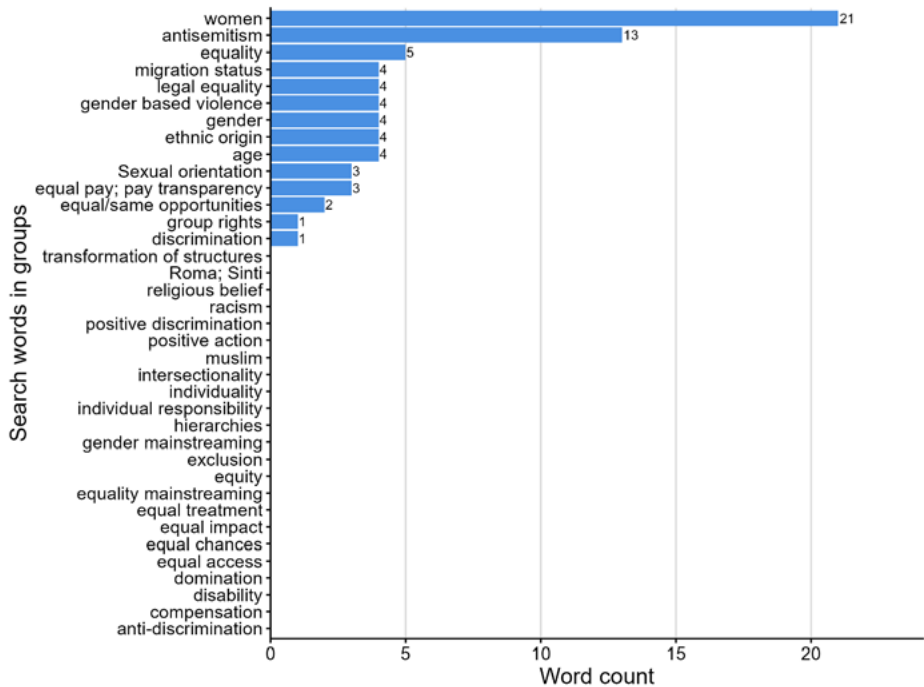
An analysis of von der Leyen's 176 rhetorical interventions from her renomination until the end of her first year shows that 19 interventions, approximately 10.8 per cent (15 speeches and 4 statements), include at least one of the gender-related code words.

The initial observation highlights a significant lack of dedicated rhetorical interventions on gender-related topics. In previous years, von der Leyen verbalised her commitment to gender-related topics in rhetorical interventions, with an explicit focus on occasions such as International Women's Day, and the relevant topics and themes appropriately aligned with the event. However, only two rhetorical interventions specifically address gender issues: President von der Leyen's statement on Budapest Pride (von der Leyen 2025f) and her video message on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (von der Leyen 2024f). One rhetorical intervention addresses a topic closely connected with the theme of anti-discrimination: "Speech by President von der Leyen at the memorial ceremony commemorating the one-year anniversary of the 7 October acts of terror" (von der Leyen 2024e). This absence is especially notable given the historical practice of regularly addressing these important subjects in dedicated formats.

The exclusion of specific topics is a consistent feature of von der Leyen's rhetorical interventions. Particularly notable are the missing terms: *disability*, *intersectionality*, *gender mainstreaming*, *equal treatment*, and others. The graph illustrates the words traced and the words not mentioned.

¹ All included speeches and statements are publicly accessible in the Commission's repository: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>.

Figure 1: Words used in von der Leyen’s rhetorical interventions



Source: 176 rhetorical interventions by von der Leyen between 18 July 2024 and 1 December 2025 in combination with the code words. Compiled by Alba María Kugelmeier López.

Despite the specific gender-related references in both the Budapest Pride (von der Leyen 2025f) and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (von der Leyen 2024f) statements, the overall gender-related word count is low, with *women* being the most frequently used term.

Interestingly, several terms that are typically associated with gender discourse also appear, such as *discrimination*, which occurs three times, and *mainstreaming*, which appears once. However, only one instance of *discrimination* can be counted in the gender-related dataset, as the remaining occurrences are not embedded in a gender- or equality-related context and therefore cannot be included in the qualitative gender analysis. In these cases, the term is used in relation to economic and trade policy. “Our products are systematically discriminated against in public procurement because of Beijing’s ‘Buy China’ policy. Goods and services that are ‘made in China’ get an automatic 20% price advantage in public bids” (von der Leyen 2025a). Similarly, in another instance: “But what we also see is that one government in our Union is heading in the exact opposite direction, drifting away from the Single Market. How can a government attract more European investments if, at the same time, it discriminates against European companies by taxing them more than others?” (von der Leyen 2024d). The term *mainstreaming* is used in the context of budgetary allocations: “And social investments are mainstreamed

across the whole budget for the first time. The structure of the budget changes, but our values remain the same" (von der Leyen 2025b).

The same applies to words such as *migration* and *youth*. The term *migration* often occurs, especially in speeches delivered before the official commencement on 1 December 2024. However, *migration* is primarily used in relation to the labour market, skilled workers, and border security, both regular and irregular, rather than in relation to anti-discrimination or intersectionality. The same applies to the term *youth* in relation to workforce: "They create new jobs for African youth, new skills for African researchers, and new business opportunities for African companies" (von der Leyen 2025c).

When gender-related words appear in von der Leyen's rhetorical interventions, they tend to cluster within thematically coherent passages, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

"As I promised you in July, I fought tooth and nail just to ensure we got to 11 *women* in this College. Up from 5 when the first set of nominations came in. And yet it is still not even half – and it is certainly not enough. And we have achieved so much. We have tackled *the gender pay gap*. We have taken European action on *violence against women*. We did what people said was impossible by unblocking women on boards. I want to thank all of you – women and men – in this House for the cross-party support. We will never stop fighting for *equality*. This is why I am so glad to have Hadja Lahbib as Commissioner for *Equality*. She has broken so many glass ceilings herself. She will strengthen women's rights and ensure equality for all. Together, we will work every day to bring different parts of our society together. And I have chosen Glenn Micallef – born in the year the Berlin Wall fell – to be the bridge between generations. He will support our young people and ensure solidarity between people of all *ages*" (von der Leyen 2024b, emphasis A. K. L.).

This passage demonstrates that gender-related references are not distributed randomly but are embedded in coherent argumentative sections with a clear thematic focus on equality and women's rights. This pattern is particularly evident in the statements concerning anti-discrimination and violence against women, in which gender equality is foregrounded as a key political goal. Furthermore, von der Leyen's statement in support of her candidacy contains a dedicated section on equality:

"On *women's rights*, we have achieved together the unthinkable, thanks to the amazing solidarity in this House of European Democracy, across party lines. After ten years of struggle, we have unblocked the *Women on Boards Directive*. We have achieved huge progress on *pay transparency* – there is not the slightest reason why *women* should be paid less than men for the same work. But there is still so much to do. Stop the rise in *violence against women*. Reconcile care and career, not only for *women*, but *women* are mostly affected. Close the *pay* and pensions *gap*. It is no coincidence that poverty in old age has a *female face*" (von der Leyen 2024g, emphasis A. K. L.).

In contrast, gender-related terminology appears only sporadically within broader rhetorical interventions outside these thematically concentrated sections. For instance, von der Leyen states: "You are pioneers of democracy – from establishing the earliest Parliaments to advancing *women's rights*. Your social market economy is embedded in the foundations of our European project" (von der Leyen 2025d, emphasis A. K. L.).

Interestingly, von der Leyen often uses gender-related terms, specifically referencing her own gender identity. Five times², she describes her public role through personal iden-

2 Three of these speeches were excluded from the total count of gender-related speeches because they do not otherwise discuss gender themes.

tity markers, emphasising her roles as a mother of seven, a grandmother of five, a working wife, and a Christian. “We are accountable to our children and grandchildren, to what we believe as Christians, to God. Every existence on earth is part of a larger framework. And that is the standard to which I aim to hold myself for my children and grandchildren, at least to the best of my ability” (von der Leyen 2025e, translation A. K. L.). In addition to these self-positionings, she also frames her stance on equality through explicit statements of solidarity. In her speech on Budapest Pride, she emphasises her alignment with equality movements and LGBTQ+ rights, stating: “I will always be your ally” (von der Leyen 2025f).

6 Qualitative analysis of the words used

The identified gender-related terms occur 19 times across the corpus. However, it is important to note that these occurrences are often not associated with distinct discursive contexts, but rather stem from repeated or near-identical formulations across different rhetorical interventions. While this causes the phrase to appear in multiple speeches, it does not provide a new context for analysis. This repetition is particularly evident regarding the term *gender*: “Science has no passport, gender, ethnicity or political colour” (von der Leyen 2025h) and “We can all agree that science has no passport, no gender, no ethnicity or political party” (von der Leyen 2025i). The same can be seen with the word *female*: “That a highly successful, technologically advanced nation would cut programmes merely because their description contains words such as ‘female’, ‘climate’ or ‘diversity’? No one would have believed that. But that is the reality today” (von der Leyen 2025j), which is repeated verbatim in von der Leyen (2025k).

The term *gender* refers to well-established processes, such as addressing the gender pay gap (von der Leyen 2024b) or the efforts of the European People’s Party to promote gender balance (von der Leyen 2025i). As a tangible measure, von der Leyen announced a financial initiative under the Choose Europe programme, allocating €500 million to attract and retain leading scientists and researchers (von der Leyen 2025h). However, the references are otherwise somewhat superficial, merely highlighting the link between individuals and their potential contributions to a better future, rather than outlining specific policy initiatives (von der Leyen 2025i).

The statement for Budapest Pride (von der Leyen 2025f) cites *equality* as a core value of the EU, thereby framing the EU as a space of equality and non-discrimination. In her College of Commissioners speech, she mentions *equality* three times, explicitly highlighting the role of a Commissioner for Equality (von der Leyen 2024b). This position has since been reconfigured as the Commissioner for Crisis Management, Preparedness, and Equality. She also links equality to fundamental EU principles, including Article 2 of the Treaty on the EU, which guarantees freedom for all, as well as the rule of law and human rights, including minority rights (von der Leyen 2025f). She articulated this connection during the solemn undertaking of the College of Commissioners before the European Court of Justice, in what is considered one of her most significant speeches (von der Leyen 2025m). This framing situates equality as an EU value, thereby reinforcing its legitimacy through reference to already codified competences.

Women in the labour market are mentioned three times, once in relation to external aid for Mozambique, emphasising the need for further investment to ensure opportunities for all (von der Leyen 2024h). Regarding the statement on the signing of the European social dialogue, one paragraph explicitly addresses women in the workforce and promotes women in STEM fields (von der Leyen 2025g). Other references discuss the importance of including women in the College of Commissioners (von der Leyen 2024b). Numerous references portray women and *mothers* in contexts of violence, often framing it as an issue affecting countries outside the EU, with the EU depicted as a helper or acknowledging the problem. Those references clearly depict catastrophic situations (von der Leyen 2025h; 2024g; 2025n). As a concrete policy instrument, projects involving financial investment to improve the circumstances of women were discussed (von der Leyen 2025o). In one instance, *female* acknowledges a connection between being female, poverty, and age, indicating an understanding of intersecting forms of discrimination: “It is no coincidence that poverty in old age has a female face” (von der Leyen 2024b). However, the terms *intersectionality* or *intersectional discrimination* are not clearly mentioned, with only references to identity markers.

The full term of *violence against women* appears four times, presented as a general issue, without any mention of specific initiatives or local efforts (von der Leyen 2024b; 2024f; 2024g). Notably absent are concrete initiatives that the Commission achieved significant success with during von der Leyen's first term, such as the Istanbul Convention and the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Directive (EU) 2024/1385), are not mentioned.

Von der Leyen discusses *women's rights* on four occasions presenting the Roadmap for Women's Rights, a new gender equality policy programme, in this context (von der Leyen 2024g). This framing signals a sustained engagement with the issue and indicates a prospective commitment to develop concrete policy instruments to address gender inequality.

Equal rights occur in a context where von der Leyen talks about the future of Syria as a country: “where everyone can speak their mind. With equal rights and representation for all – men and women alike, beyond faith, ethnicity and ideology” (von der Leyen 2025n).

She highlights the Women on Board Directive as a concrete example of past initiatives, maintaining a clear focus on past achievements when discussing the *gender pay gap*, *pay transparency*, and *equal pay* (von der Leyen 2024g).

Von der Leyen makes concrete commitments to support the *LGBTIQ+* community in a single statement, explicitly framing them as a matter of *non-discrimination* and equality. In her statement on Budapest Pride (von der Leyen 2025f), she emphasises that marching for one's rights is a fundamental freedom in Europe and that every individual has the right to *love* whom they choose and to express their identity freely. She emphasises that the EU's core values of equality and non-discrimination must be respected in all member states, calling on the authorities to ensure that Pride events can proceed without fear of sanctions.

The speech on the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023 also outlines several specific initiatives for Jews, including increased EU funding for security at Jewish schools and synagogues, measures targeting social media platforms that enable the spread of antisemitism.

mitic content, and the establishment of a Europe-wide network to detect antisemitic material in all EU languages (von der Leyen 2024e). References to Jews and *antisemitism* occur 13 times in total, making this the most frequently mentioned group in the context of anti-discrimination and protective measures.

She discusses *migration* four times in a gender-related context. However, these discussions primarily focus on the EU's Migration and Asylum Pact and broader debates on irregular migration, rather than addressing migration in the context of discrimination or as an intersecting social issue. The framing is comparatively dehumanising and emphasises the challenges of migration. Occasionally, however, migration has been connected to a social dimension and the discourse on human rights: “[M]igrants are human beings like you and me. And all of us, we are protected by human rights” (von der Leyen 2024g).

References to *youth* are linked to aspirations for a better future and to the importance of creating opportunities for young people through funding strategies and concrete policy instruments (von der Leyen 2024h). By contrast, *age* does not appear as a standalone category but is usually combined with other identity markers, such as poverty (von der Leyen 2024b). This reflects the understanding of age as an intersectional category within broader anti-discrimination frameworks, rather than as an isolated axis of inequality.

Ethnicity is mentioned alongside gender and political affiliation in the 2025 State of the Union, linked to the €500 million Choose Europe initiative to attract scientists (von der Leyen 2025h), highlighting human capital's role in Europe's competitiveness. In contrast, other speeches discuss Syria, connecting ethnicity to geopolitics. Similar externalisation occurs in two speeches about migration (von der Leyen 2025n; 2024i), where related issues are not integrated into internal equality or anti-discrimination policies.

Interestingly, *equal opportunity* is framed as providing the same and life-changing opportunities in the contexts of the market and education. While equal opportunity is associated with empowering women to participate on an equal footing with men in the labour market, the framing of “same opportunities” in first speeches is primarily embedded in an economic rationale. Rather than positioning gender equality as a normative or rights-based objective rooted in women's empowerment, the argument focuses on economic competitiveness and the functioning of the internal market (von der Leyen 2025m).

7 Discussion

The analysis showed whether and how von der Leyen's speeches and statements use gender-related themes.

First, the absence of dedicated speeches is concerning because von der Leyen, who previously spoke on topics like International Women's Day, no longer does so. Gender is now addressed sporadically, without genuine commitment, because it is treated as a discretionary policy area depending on ideological priorities (Szkuta 2025). Other issues, such as US trade negotiations and EU finances, have taken precedence, sidelining gender issues and showing that they are not central to the Commission President's agenda.

Second, *discrimination* and *mainstreaming* are used within an economic or market framework. This misalignment demonstrates a depoliticisation and dehumanisation of these themes by removing them from their gender-specific context. Misunderstanding of gender issues and the use of buzzwords (d'Agostino 2024) lead to estrangement from their original context and significance.

Third, the absence of certain words is striking. These terms had previously appeared in the Commission's gender equality programmes and in von der Leyen's speeches during her first term, indicating that they are not new to her. Intersectionality, for instance, is essential for understanding the layered nature of identity-based discrimination, yet it is notably absent (European Commission 2020). Additionally, despite its treaty basis, gender mainstreaming is absent. Similarly, references to disabilities are entirely absent, rendering these individuals invisible within the political dialogue. The same neglect applies to People of Colour, as well as Roma and Sinti. This suggests that she is no longer addressing issues that clearly fall within the EU's remit.

Fourth, although progress within the Commission and the EU is mentioned, such as the drive for parity in the Commission or the Women on Boards Directive, significant accomplishments, particularly in tackling violence against women, are overlooked entirely. By omitting the Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Directive (EU) 2024/1385) and the Istanbul Convention, von der Leyen's rhetoric suggests that she sees no need to convince the audience of their importance. As noted in the introduction, the EU is increasingly leaning to the right, both within its institutions and across its Member States (Abels/Klößner 2025). Since rhetoric aims at audiences, neglecting gender-related achievements may suggest that some audiences no longer regard these issues as priorities.

Fifth, on a positive note, gender-related terms do appear in clusters in von der Leyen's key agenda-setting speeches, such as her State of the Union address, her candidate speech, and the speech before the College of Commissioners. Additionally, in her speech on the "New College of Commissioners and Its Programme" (von der Leyen 2024b), she acknowledges multiple forms of discrimination resulting in negative outcomes for individuals, which can be interpreted as addressing intersectional concerns. These clusters suggest that, within the limits of her political environment, von der Leyen can mainly address gender issues through highly visible public speeches. After all, von der Leyen is a strategic speaker.

Sixth, von der Leyen intentionally varies her self-presentation depending on the context, making use of the considerable autonomy provided by political rhetoric. By presenting herself as a working mother, grandmother, and Christian, she appeals to traditional values and fosters trust with more conservative audiences. Simultaneously, she presents herself as an ally of the LGBTQI+ community when speaking about herself, emphasising progressive positions and engaging with contemporary societal issues. This adaptable self-presentation enables her to garner broader support, remain politically effective, and enhance her personal credibility across different settings.

Seventh, crises are a central theme in von der Leyen's rhetoric. It is therefore unsurprising that women and mothers frequently appear in her narratives, which focus on conflicts and personal stories that primarily depict women as victims. However, these narratives are almost entirely set outside the EU. This framing highlights the EU's geo-

political role, drawing attention to violence and suggesting that such suffering occurs primarily outside the EU, rather than acknowledging it as an internal issue. The question arises as to whether she engages in a form of *othering* in her rhetoric.

Finally, in the context of migration, there is a discernible tendency towards securitisation, as the issue is primarily framed through the EU's Migration and Asylum Pact and wider debates on irregular migration. This framing constructs migration predominantly as a matter of security, control, and governance, thereby positioning it within a risk-oriented policy logic rather than as a social phenomenon. This depoliticises migration, viewing migrants as objects of management. Similarly, EU equality policies tend to securitise issues such as discrimination and inequality, raising questions about whether social problems are becoming security concerns. As this is not the focus of the article, further research is needed.

8 Conclusion

The analysis of von der Leyen's speeches and statements during her second term presents a mixed picture. On the positive side, gender-related terms appear in clusters in her key agenda-setting addresses, such as the State of the Union, her candidate speech, and the speech before the College of Commissioners. She also references financial support for projects that promote gender-related objectives, including initiatives outside the EU.

However, a broader analysis reveals a clear shift away from politicising gender-related issues, creating a concerning scenario of further marginalisation and avoidance. Gender equality does not feature as a main topic in any of her speeches and is the primary subject in only two statements. References to gender are scattered and context-dependent rather than being connected to institutional policies or structural reforms. Even milestone directives and achievements from her first term are largely absent. Proposed concrete measures, such as appointing a Commissioner with a gender portfolio, remain limited, while key issues within the EU's remit, including gender mainstreaming, are no longer addressed. This casts doubt on von der Leyen's overall commitment. Critical terms such as intersectionality, disability, Sinti and Roma, and People of Colour are absent, effectively rendering entire groups invisible in her rhetoric. Furthermore, the use of concepts such as discrimination and mainstreaming within a market logic demonstrates a depoliticisation of these terms, distancing them from their original purposes and transformative potential.

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