

Resilient Women and the ‘She-Cession’

Gender Equality Discourse in the EU

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Abstract

This article discusses gender mainstreaming – the institutionalization of a gender equality dimension in policy-making – in recent EU policy discourse, focusing on Ursula von der Leyen’s first mandate as President of the European Commission (2019-2024) and the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on women and labour. The pandemic-induced recession, which has been termed the ‘she-cession’ due to the widening gender gap in the paid workforce, put women in a “disproportionately” vulnerable position, also in terms of access to the economy. In this context, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) – the overarching EU funding mechanism and the specific plans developed by each member state to use RRF funds effectively – have represented a unique opportunity to channel extraordinary resources towards redressive measures identifying women as the main beneficiaries, fighting economic abuse and promoting equal treatment. Building on Ursula von der Leyen’s pledge to make gender equality a key priority in her agenda, the article presents a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of a collection of interrelated EU political, institutional and legal documents that address gender equality and gender-sensitive recovery measures. The aim is to offer a critical discursive perspective on how the EU is struggling to effectively incorporate gender mainstreaming to improve the rights that are central to its democratic functioning.

“In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.”

(Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, art. 8)

1. Background

Gender mainstreaming refers to the systematic integration of a gender equality perspective into all stages of policy-making. It involves embedding gender considerations into the very fabric of policies through positive action measures designed to address gender-based disparities. The commitment was formally enshrined in 1999 with the Treaty of Amsterdam, which established this approach as a central objective of the EU’s equality policy. Importantly, and relevant to this analysis, gender mainstreaming carries a strong discursive element, emerging through the

translation of policy objectives into language within a context where consensus must be negotiated and constructed (Verloo 2005).

Looking back at the recent political past of the European Union from a short diachronic perspective, this article discusses how strategies of gender mainstreaming were framed in EU policy discourse during Ursula von der Leyen's first mandate as President of the European Commission (2019-2024), the first woman to hold the position. After several gender policy achievements during her time as a politician at a national level in Germany in the preceding years (Abels and Mushaben 2020) and prior to her historic election in July 2019, she presented her political guidelines in a document entitled *A Union That Strives for More*, which served as the foundational policy document outlining the vision and priorities of her candidacy. This written agenda, which was formally submitted to the European Parliament as part of the institutional confirmation process, prioritized gender equality as a necessary dimension for "a prosperous and social Europe" (von der Leyen 2019, 11) among key issues such as climate action, digital transformation and social justice, and anticipated the flagship initiative of a European Gender Strategy.¹

Once elected, von der Leyen insisted on gender balance within the European Commission and appointed Helena Dalli as Commissioner for Equality.² Shortly after, however, her "outspoken commitment" (Elomäki and Kantola 2021) to gender equality in a Europe striving for "more when it comes to social fairness and prosperity" (von der Leyen 2019, 8) was soon tested by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis heavily affected women not only due to the spike of domestic violence it generated – denounced as the 'shadow pandemic'³ – but also for its gendered impact on the economy and the labour market (Russo 2021). This phenomenon has led some scholars to argue "that the crisis has caused a 'she-cession,' where women's labor market outcomes and prospects have deteriorated more than men's" (Bluedorn et al. 2023, 1), despite the growth of remote and flexible work arrangements (Vyas 2021).

The article examines the articulation of gender mainstreaming as an instance of "discursive politics," where concepts are framed, debated and constructed within policy narratives (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). The context is von der Leyen's first mandate, set against a backdrop of societal disruption that required exceptional responses at political, institutional and legal levels, including gender-sensitive recovery measures. After selecting a corpus of EU written documents, the analysis intends to address the following research questions:

¹ The opening statement von der Leyen delivered to the European Parliament on 16 July 2019 closely followed the structure and themes of her political manifesto, while establishing the rhetorical basis for her first mandate as Commission President along the same lines.

² The 2024-2029 Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management is Hajda Lahbib.

³ Although the numbers were comparatively lower, gender-based violence against men and boys also increased during the pandemic (Warburton and Raniolo 2020).

- What are the key features of EU policy discourse that prioritize gender equality and promote gender-sensitive recovery measures during the first von der Leyen Commission?
- In what ways is the impact of the pandemic on women's labour discursively constructed?
- What types of discursive legitimation for gender mainstreaming are seen to emerge? What values and long-term strategies are given priority?

The following section provides the description of the selected corpus and of the methodological steps that will be carried out in the analysis.

2. Data and methodology

Diverse genres populate the field of policy communication, mediating objectives, priorities and decisions to different audiences as debated by parliaments and deliberated by government bodies. For this reason, they are often included in analyses of EU communication as they may provide a comprehensive account of policy discourse and its evolution over time (Savski 2018).

The small ad hoc corpus manually compiled for this study comprises eleven written documents of varying length for a total of 180,530 words, drawn from political, institutional and legal contexts, as detailed in Appendix 1. Ideally, these documents trace a short diachronic trajectory that goes from electoral pledges and agenda-setting statements to binding legislation and policy implementation. First, we have three strategic texts from the European Commission:

- *A Union That Strives for More: My Agenda for Europe*, von der Leyen's political guidelines for the European Commission from 2019 to 2024;
- *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, announced by von der Leyen on 5 March 2020;
- *The State of the Union 2023*, a publication including several key documents in addition to the speech itself, in which the President of the European Commission outlines the main priorities and flagship initiatives for the future, building on past successes and achievements.

Next, we find two legal instruments of the European Union (a 2021 regulation and a 2023 directive):

- Regulation (EU) 2021/241 Establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility;
- Directive (EU) 2023/970 to Strengthen the Application of the Principle of Equal Pay for Equal Work or Work of Equal Value between Men and Women through Pay Transparency and Enforcement Mechanisms.

Lastly, the corpus comprises six institutional documents, produced by advisory committees and expert groups that contribute to policy-making and address gender equality issues from various perspectives. While these entities do not have formal legislative power, they play an important role in shaping policy by providing expertise and supporting informed decisions. Their findings do not create policy directly but help communicate policy-related information to both decision-makers and the public:

- A 2021 report, *COVID-19 and Its Impact on Women and Women's Poverty*, requested by the FEMM Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (May 2021);
- A 2022 briefing, *An Ambitious Future for Europe's Women after COVID-19: Mental Load, Gender Equality in Teleworking and Unpaid Care Work after the Pandemic*, requested by the FEMM Committee (March 2022);
- A 2022 briefing, *Gender Equality in the Recovery and Resilience Facility* on the implementation of gender equality in National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) by EPRS, the European Parliamentary Research Service (October 2022);
- A 2022 paper, *The EU's Evolving Legal and Policy Approaches to Gender Equality*, by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), an EU agency which conducts independent research, provides data and shares best practices to support policy-making and improve gender equality across the EU;
- A 2023 factsheet, *Understanding Economic Violence against Women: The Need for Harmonised Definitions and Data in the EU* by EIGE;
- A 2023 report on gender mainstreaming, *The Pathway to Progress: Strengthening Effective Structures for Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming in the EU* by EIGE.

These policy documents include data, fact sheets and infographics, as well as links to institutional data banks such as those provided by Eurostat, the European Commission's open data portal, and EIGE's independent surveys, offering a more granular, data-driven visual representation of gender inequalities.⁴ Even within dedicated sources, data evidence is not immediately easy to interpret. First, it is dispersed across multiple webpages, hyperlinks and online reports published at different times and in varying formats, resulting in a fragmented picture of gender disparities in the EU's multi-country context. Second, the interpretation of policy data – especially on challenging social issues like gender inequality – is not unequivocal but inherently debatable. While von der Leyen's agenda-setting communications employ data,

⁴ Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>) is the statistical office of the European Union. The official portal for European data is <https://data.europa.eu/en>. EIGE's gender statistics can be accessed at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs>.

statistics and visual elements selectively, insofar as they serve to reinforce her political message, the two legal instruments in the corpus merely reference data evidence.⁵

This methodologically diverse analysis adopts a corpus-assisted approach, in which qualitative insights from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) are informed by selected quantitative findings from corpus tools (Heritage and Taylor 2024; Taylor and Marchi 2018; Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013; Baker 2006). Using the Sketch Engine software (Lexical Computing CZ 2021), the first step is keyword analysis, a computational, quantitative method that helps to uncover the conceptual structure of textual evidence in a target (or focus) corpus by comparing it to a reference corpus. The procedure identifies lexical patterns that reveal the discursive focus in the target corpus and guides the qualitative examination of selected concordance lines, that is, contextual instances of those same keywords. Concordance analysis allows for the exploration of how meaning is constructed within broader discursive patterns through the interplay of linguistic means, including collocational patterns and semantic prosody – the tendency of a lexical item to co-occur with surrounding words that convey either positive or negative evaluative meaning (Taylor and Marchi 2018; Baker 2006).

Moving next to more extensive textual samples, particular attention is placed on the representation of social actors in discourse (van Leeuwen 1996). Actor representation involves choices of inclusion, backgrounding or exclusion – whether actors are explicitly named, indirectly referenced or entirely omitted from the text. They may also be represented personally (by name) or impersonally, in terms of categorical identifiers such as institutions and demographic groups, or functional ones such as social roles (van Leeuwen 1996). This, in turn, draws attention to transitivity structures, which determine whether actors are depicted as agents or recipients of action through active or passive sentences, or whether actions are abstracted through nominalizations, putting “a different perspective on the description of an event, by emphasizing or de-emphasizing the agency” (van Dijk 1981, 165). In addition, agency is shaped by how social actors position themselves, assert authority and manage ideological alignment through discursive strategies, including modalization. Modal expressions are examined here to assess how certainty, obligation, or possibility is constructed in EU discourse. The combination of syntactic and semantic features – active/passive voice, nominalization, modalization – help to reveal how institutions frame gender mainstreaming as a policy response

⁵ By way of example, here are three citations from a. von der Leyen's Gender Equality Strategy, b. the Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation, and c. the Pay Transparency Directive: a. “The Commission will also disseminate data and analysis of trends on the representation of women and men in decision-making positions in cooperation with the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)” (European Commission 2020, 14); b. “All data in the regulation is from Eurostat; cut-off date May 2020 for historical data” (Regulation EU 2021/241, Annex 1, footnote 1); c. “Compiling wage statistics broken down by sex and providing the Commission (Eurostat) with accurate and complete statistics is essential for analysing and monitoring changes in the gender pay gap at Union level” (Directive EU 2023/970, Recital 62).

and whether they portray themselves as agents of change or as passive observers of systemic gender inequality. This approach avoids reducing the discourse to a self-validating list of politically correct terms, or “sweeping statements of purpose” (Guerrina, MacRae and Masselot 2023, 1), and highlights the role of discourse in shaping social and political imaginaries, that is, shared visions of what is thinkable, desirable or inevitable. As imaginaries become institutionalized and naturalized, they gain performative power, acquiring deontic force: they can constrain or enable specific forms of social agency by embedding normative expectations into institutional language and practice.

Finally, the interdisciplinary orientation and social focus of CDS make it well-suited to context-dependent analyses of gender and policy discourse (Catalano and Waugh 2020; Wodak 2018; Wodak and Meyer 2015; Hart and Cap 2014). Understanding context is crucial, particularly given the diversity of institutional voices involved – from the President of the European Commission to lawmakers, standing committees and EU-affiliated researchers – through which an orchestrated view of gender mainstreaming is constructed. As Savski (2018, 356) notes, “from a discursive perspective, every policy or law codifies a particular construction of social reality.” On these grounds, this study adopts the “interdisciplinary nexus of discourse-oriented European studies” (Wodak 2018, 4), integrating feminist policy research, labour economics, and political communication, drawing on the work of Lombardo and Meier (2008), Elomäki (2015), Elomäki and Kantola (2021), Goldin (2021), Mergaert and Minto (2021), Russo (2021), Vyas (2021), Donà (2022), Bluedorn et al. (2023), and Debusscher (2023), among others.

3. Keyword analysis

The first step involved keyword analysis as a computational and quantitative entry point into the corpus. Within a CDS framework, this method is particularly valuable for identifying patterns of lexical salience that may reflect thematic priorities in text, underlying bias or omissions. The EU target corpus was compared against the enTenTen 2021 reference corpus, using Sketch Engine’s default keyword extraction procedure.⁶ The software generated two ranked lists based on keyness, that is, the occurrence of items with comparatively higher (or lower) frequency in the EU corpus: one list of individual keywords and one of multi-word expressions (key phrases). As noted by Baker (2006), the inclusion of multi-word terms alongside single keywords enables researchers to trace not only lexical salience but also the discursive framing and typical associations that structure meaning in discourse. While keywords often point to abstract or ideologically charged concepts, key phrases provide richer

⁶ The enTenTen21 corpus is part of the TenTen family of web-based corpora, developed for Sketch Engine by Lexical Computing using automated web crawling. It comprises billions of English words from diverse online sources and is designed as a general-language reference corpus for keyword analysis.

thematic specificity. The top twenty lexical items and phrases were manually selected to support qualitative analysis (Table 1).

Rank	Keywords	Key Phrases
1	mainstreaming	resilience plan
2	EIGE	gender equality
3	RRF	gender mainstreaming
4	equality	member states
5	disaggregated	governmental body
6	VAW	independent body
7	gender	equality body
8	resilience	economic violence
9	gender-based	equal pay
10	teleworking	principle of equal pay
11	NRRP	financial contribution
12	TFEU	institutional mechanism
13	governmental	statistics disaggregated by sex
14	nextgenerationeu	gender budgeting
15	gender-sensitive	gender equality body
16	intersectional	work of equal value
17	childcare	promotion of gender
18	she-cession	structure of gender
19	gender-neutral	gender pay
20	non-discrimination	COVID-19 crisis

Tab. 1: Keywords and Key Phrases⁷

Since gender policy discourse was the explicit criterion guiding corpus collection, this thematic focus takes precedence in both lists. Most keywords and key phrases are strictly related to gender equality, policy-making and economic recovery, specifically compounds such as *gender equality*, *gender-sensitive*, *gender-neutral*, *gender mainstreaming* and *gender budgeting*. Terms like *intersectional* and *disaggregated by sex* pertain to social analysis and statistics, as conducted by EIGE, and will be considered later. Institutional and policy-driven vocabulary is reflected in terms like *resilience*, *resilience plan*, *Next Generation EU*, *RRF*, *NRRP* and *TFEU*, indicating a robust institutional and legislative framework. Phrases such as *governmental body*, *independent body* and *equality body* highlight institutional mechanisms for *promotion of gender* policies. *Financial contribution*, *teleworking*, *childcare*, *non-discrimination*, *work of equal value* and *equal pay* suggest redressive measures for gender equality in economic structures and employment, including the assistance of technology.

Yet, harsh undertones disrupt the picture. One such theme is violence against women (VAW), encompassing physical, psychological, and economic forms and including online violence and hate crime (Barker and Jurasz 2020). In addition, the concordance lines for *gender-based*

⁷ As for acronyms, *EIGE* stands for the European Institute for Gender Equality; *RRF* refers to the Recovery and Resilience Facility; *VAW* denotes Violence against Women; *NRRP* is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan; and *TFEU* stands for the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Finally, *Next Generation EU* (in the corpus output as *nextgenerationeu*) is the stimulus package adopted by the Commission to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

consistently exhibit negative semantic prosody, with “violence,” “inequality/inequalities” and “(pay) discrimination” as dominant collocates (Table 2).

inequalities, such as particularly brutal forms of ‘violence against women’ as	<i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i>	violence and discrimination violence, hate crimes and hate speech violence, that is directed against a woman or a girl
a gender equal Europe where	<i>gender-based</i>	violence, sex discrimination and structural inequality
structural gender inequalities, such as by blocking action against comprehensive vision of how to tackle the intersection between	<i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i> <i>gender-based</i>	violence and discrimination violence and gender stereotypes inequalities and victimisation inequalities and other forms of discrimination
an important obstacle for potential victims of		pay discrimination, especially in highly gendered-segregated employment
a situation where	<i>gender-based</i>	pay discrimination and bias can go undetected

Tab. 2: A manually selected subset of gender-based concordance lines

the gendered and intersectional nature of understanding of what constitutes unfair financial settlements. Perpetrators of most at risk of experiencing abuse which involved disproportionately affected by	<i>economic violence</i> <i>economic violence</i> <i>Economic violence</i> <i>economic violence</i> <i>economic violence</i> <i>economic violence</i> <i>economic violence</i>	, and the heightened vulnerability of victims and the gendered nature of the phenomenon in intimate relations use economic control ? Women in heterosexual relations by a partner since the age of 15 . Findings from an EU-wide survey on violence limits victims' access to justice
Failure to legally recognise the harms caused by	<i>economic violence</i>	

Tab. 3: A manually selected subset of concordance lines for economic violence

While pay transparency failures, often “undetected” (Table 2), are addressed by the 2023 directive in terms of labour rights and compliance, “economic violence” (Table 3) is, by contrast, predominantly associated with intimate partner abuse in the domestic setting. It is framed through the language of dependency, coercion and control, focusing on victims’ diminished autonomy, restricted access to financial resources, and limited capacity to seek legal defence (“heightened vulnerability”). However, the discursive separation between private economic harm and workplace discrimination may obscure the ways in which household-level coercion and structural inequalities in the labour market are often interrelated. It reinforces a dichotomy between what is recognized as violence and what is treated as legal-economic inequality, despite their shared material consequences for women’s financial independence and overall well-being. Building on this distinction, the following section examines how gender mainstreaming was articulated during the *COVID-19 crisis*, when these two domains – domestic vulnerability and structural labour inequality – converged under the economic pressures of the so-called *she-cession*.⁸

⁸ The term ‘she-cession’ was coined in 2020 by C. Nicole Manson, President and Chief Executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research in Washington.

4. Gender mainstreaming in the EU narrative

In her political manifesto, before her first election and the COVID-19 outbreak, von der Leyen framed gender equality in a broad way within the overarching framework of a Union striving for more, nonetheless acknowledging the pervasiveness and persistence of gender-based violence,

- (1) Gender equality is a critical component of economic growth. The European Gender Strategy will systematically address the way laws impact the decisions women take throughout their lives: starting a job, running a business, getting paid, getting married, having children, managing assets and drawing a pension. We must give women and men equal legal rights across all of these life decisions. [...] Gender-based violence remains a terrifying reality for too many people in our Union. (von der Leyen 2019, 11)

Her political stance is explicit: inequalities and gender-based violence are structural obstacles to the Union's prosperity and will be "systematically" addressed. Actor representation follows a strategic variation. "Women" are foregrounded in connection with economic participation and encouraged to take their place in the labour market to achieve financial independence. "Women and men" appear when legal equality is emphasized; and "people" is used in relation to victimhood and vulnerability, particularly in the context of all forms of gender-based violence. Although the use of a stative verb ("remains") constructs gender-based violence as persistent and normalized, institutional agency is invoked through the inclusive *we*, while strong deontic modality ("we must") frames legal equality as an obligation. In the same section of the document, she claims that "we need equality for all and equality in all its senses" as a way to capitalize on diversity, pledging that "we will propose new anti-discrimination legislation" and "binding pay transparency measures" (von der Leyen 2019, 11). Through presuppositions about offsetting inequalities and assumptions about economic arguments, the use of generalisations ("we need equality for all") and assertive moralisation ("we must," "we will") urges a broad imperative. In sum, *A Union that Strives for More* presents a rhetorically unified and morally legitimized vision of progress, in which individual opportunity drives societal growth through policies aimed at redressing power imbalances. This recurrent frame in EU policy discourse stresses "economic arguments for gender equality and makes visible the economic assumptions that underpin EU gender equality policy" (Elomäki 2015, 299).

In March 2020, the Gender Equality Strategy once more acknowledges the presence of gender-based violence (example 2), while foregrounding the EU's agentive stance (example 3) and gender mainstreaming (example 4).

- (2) Gender-based violence – or violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately – remains one of our societies' biggest challenges and is deeply rooted in gender inequality. (European Commission 2020, 3)

Again, a stative verb (“remains”) is used, while the adverb “disproportionately” is drawn from the language of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe 2011), where its connotative weight underscores the gendered nature of harm and inequality. Nonetheless, the overall framing remains positive.

- (3) Thanks to robust equal treatment legislation and jurisprudence, efforts to mainstream the gender perspective into different policy areas, and laws to address particular inequalities, the EU has made significant progress in gender equality in the last decades. [...] However, no Member State has achieved full gender equality and progress is slow. (European Commission 2020, 2).
- (4) Gender mainstreaming ensures that policies and programmes maximise the potential of all – women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity. The aim is to redistribute power, influence and resources in a fair and gender-equal way, tackling inequality, promoting fairness, and creating opportunity. (European Commission 2020, 15)

In examples 3 and 4, the use of nominalization (“progress” and “gender mainstreaming”) avoids assigning explicit institutional responsibility and contributes to describing the EU as a detached monitor of progress that gender-sensitive policies have the power to activate (“ensures” is a causative verb). In the clause “progress is slow,” epistemic modality tempers critique and implies inevitability. The mention of “women and men, girls and boys” can be seen as aspiring to full inclusion and an intersectional perspective, but whether it is genuinely so depends on how “diversity” is operationalized in practice.

It should be considered that the EU narrative is not static or unfailingly progressive: “Unfortunately progress with regard to gender equality is neither inevitable nor irreversible” (European Commission 2020, 2). Instead, it “is caught between projects that want to intensify democracy and expand it throughout different societal fields, and projects that want to limit and reduce it” (Carpentier and Wimmer 2025, 5). That “progress,” though significant, can be slow may depend on a variety of reasons. Some of them are not necessarily overtly antagonistic to gender equality but are the consequence of uneven national implementation, structural

constraints, or the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes.⁹ In contrast, one such antagonistic project is composed of 'anti-gender' movements that campaign globally and within the EU in favour of traditional norms, roles and identities and against what they (mis)construe as 'gender ideology,' opposing gender equality, women's sexual and reproductive rights and the demands of LGBTQ+ communities (Gwiazda and Minkova 2024).¹⁰

The 2018 study *Backlash in Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights in the EU*, commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM committee, documented the situation in six Member States – Austria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (European Parliament 2018). EIGE has also reported dissonant gender regimes in Member States in which equality rights have experienced “an overall rise in intolerance and hate,” fuelled by “well-funded organised ‘anti-gender movements’” (EIGE 2022, 4). To date, in the current European Parliament, which has seen a decline in women's representation, conservative and far-right political groups (*European Conservatives and Reformists*, *Patriots for Europe* and *Europe for Sovereign Nations*) oppose progressive gender policies by labelling them as part of a biased 'gender ideology' agenda (Rossilli 2024; Ska 2024).

In effect, it was a matter of days before the pandemic in the early months of 2020 reshaped political expectations, substantially worsening pre-existing inequalities that had long persisted beneath the surface of policy rhetoric. Again, in example 5 below, the intransitive verb “result” describes a more negative outcome for the vulnerable category of “older women” than for men, without assigning agency and responsibility to specific institutional actors.

- (5) Accumulated lifetime gender employment and pay gaps result in an even wider pension gap and consequently older women are more at risk of poverty than men. (European Commission 2020, 10)

⁹ In a Special Eurobarometer survey on gender equality in December 2024, over one-third of EU respondents (38%) agreed with the statement that a woman's primary role is to care for the home and family, with only 50% disagreeing. In 11 Member States, a majority endorsed this view. Additionally, 51% agreed that family life suffers when the mother has a full-time job. According to the survey, these attitudes are particularly prevalent in several Eastern European countries (Bonini 2024).

¹⁰ In the corpus, gender ideology is defined as “a concept created on the basis of a purposeful misinterpretation of the term ‘gender,’ to gather support around restrictive traditional gender roles and criticism of various progressive causes seen as challenging them” (EIGE 2022, 17). The term, in practice, brings together actors from diverse ideological backgrounds. While it is often framed in opposition to women's rights, it also targets non-traditional gender identities and sexual orientations. Notably, some celebrity women – such as Martina Navratilova and J. K. Rowling – have voiced criticism of aspects of LGBTQ+ discourse, particularly around transgender issues, arguing that it undermines female identity. These views are also present in segments of radical or gender-critical feminism across distinct generations, such as Janice Raymond, Linda Bellos, Julia Bindel and Kathleen Stock.

While von der Leyen's electoral agenda had positioned gender equality as a core EU value linked to fairness and opportunity, the onset of the crisis and subsequent recession recontextualized these priorities within a crisis frame. The discourse now stresses persistent structural disparities affecting women across their entire life course and manifesting in multiple forms of discrimination (examples 6, 7 and 8).

- (6) The economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a disproportionately negative impact on women and gender equality, and job losses have often been concentrated in low-paid, female-dominated sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the continued, structural undervaluation of work predominantly carried out by women and has demonstrated the high socio-economic value of women's work in front-line services, such as health care, cleaning, childcare, social care and residential care for older people and other adult dependents, which stands in strong contrast to its low visibility and recognition. (Directive EU 2023/970, Recital 13)
- (7) Even if, overall, women encounter a higher likelihood of poverty throughout their life courses, the pandemic has increased such likelihood as women have been disproportionately and negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis vis-à-vis their male counterparts. This disparity can be largely attributed to the fact that in contrast to previous economic recessions, the governmental measures to halt the pandemic have had the most indirect impact on the economic sectors in which women tend to be overrepresented – i.e., gastronomy, hospitality, retail, care, domestic work. (European Parliament 2021, 10)
- (8) A general lack of transparency about pay levels within organisations maintains a situation where gender-based pay discrimination and bias can go undetected or, where suspected, are difficult to prove. (Directive EU 2023/970, Recital 16)

The Pay Transparency Directive (example 8) explicitly acknowledges the persistent opacity in pay structures that allows gender-based discrimination to go undetected, but avoids direct attribution and blame, as the subject of the causative verb “maintains” is an abstract concept. From a discursive perspective, this reflects a rhetorical tendency to acknowledge systemic problems without clearly signalling institutional action or accountability (“job losses have often been concentrated in low-paid, female-dominated sectors” in example 6; “governmental

measures have had the most indirect impact” in example 7, where agency is nominally present but backgrounded through abstraction).

Research has shown that forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence, as well as coercing and controlling behaviours such as economic violence, often co-occur, within the household and in the workplace. “Violence is frequently perceived as a private matter; however, it profoundly affects nearly every aspect of a victim’s life, including their professional environment” (Garro et al. 2024, 4). In the EU corpus under scrutiny, for instance, “perpetrators of economic violence” are described as engaging in “economic abuse,” “control,” “exploitation,” or “sabotage” against their victims and we learn that “violence and harassment in the world of work” are also a reality (European Commission 2020, 5). However, the picture is far more complex and often contested, as significant gaps remain unexplained, concerning how not only women, but also “their male counterparts” have been affected by the consequences of the pandemic, including domestic and intimate partner violence. For example, studies such as Johnson et al. (2022) and Garro et al. (2024) highlight the broad economic impacts of abuse on female survivors but also call for greater recognition of male victims and the underreported dynamics of violence in the workplace. This suggests that, while gendered patterns are clearly visible in policy discourse, the lived experiences of violence and their economic consequences transcend binary categories and call for more intersectional approaches.

Nonetheless, the findings provided by EIGE on economic hardship and gender show that, despite similar percentage drops in employment during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (-2.4% for both men and women), women ultimately faced worse outcomes. While 2.6 million men and 2.2 million women lost their jobs in absolute terms, men – particularly younger and less-educated workers – were more likely to recover quickly as economies reopened. In contrast, women experienced a greater reduction in working hours across nearly all EU countries and a slower employment recovery, leading to a persistent gender employment gap (EIGE n.d.). These findings convincingly support the claim, repeatedly observed in the target corpus, that while both sexes were affected, the longer-term economic burden has indeed “disproportionately” impacted women.

Several lexical items in the EU corpus point to the ways in which, over history, gender inequalities have solidified into roles, assumptions and cultural attitudes. We find “coercive gender norms,” “deeply entrenched stereotypes” and, with COVID-19, the “exacerbation of traditional gender roles and inequalities.” These issues are often expressed in public discourse through common metaphors. Among them, as detailed in the examples below, we may list the gender gap in salaries (and consequently pensions) (9), the burden of care (10), the mental load (11), and the motherhood penalty (12), particularly felt in Italy. Additionally, actor representation provides further insights into how social actors are portrayed or obscured in

these narratives, revealing who is assigned responsibility or agency and who remains invisible or passive.

- (9) Women earn on average 16% less than men, even though they achieve higher qualifications. (von der Leyen 2019, 11)

“Women” are referred to as a homogeneous mass, grouping individuals into one undifferentiated category. The active verb “earn” attributes agency to the group, yet it also masks variations in age, sector and nationality.

- (10) Women are expected to bear the double burden of paid and unpaid work. (European Parliament 2022a, 4)

The passive construction “are expected” removes the social actor who holds that expectation (governments, employers, or family), while “women” are cast as recipients rather than agents, obscuring who perpetuates or enforces this “double burden.”

- (11) Furthermore, women also shoulder the majority of the mental load related to organising care (budgeting for, planning and scheduling care and household chores). (European Parliament 2022a, 6)

Women are framed as a general category, while the use of “shoulder” (a verb type describing a material process) positions them as active bearers of a tangible “mental load.” The elaboration in parentheses materializes and specifies the tasks, linking “women” to a set of caregiving functions.

- (12) Italian women are prone to choose part-time careers or leave employment whatsoever, in exchange to providing informal care to their children. This is also what has been largely denominated within the gender equality literature as the ‘motherhood penalty.’ It is considered there is a ‘penalty’ in ‘motherhood’ because part-time employment or the cessation of employment tend to not only represent lower earnings during the life course and thus a higher likelihood of poverty for women, but also irregular employment patterns which are not accounted for in Italian (and European) pension schemes, increasing the prospects of women poverty also at an old age. (European Parliament 2021, 23)

By specifying “Italian women” within a comparative overview of countries, the text differentiates this subgroup from women elsewhere but still takes them as a whole. “Prone to choose” casts them as passively inclined rather than actively deciding, and links them functionally to the caregiving role. The subsequent nominalization (“the ‘motherhood penalty’”) abstracts their lived decisions into a general conceptual category.

In sum, these examples frame structural inequalities as embedded in and perpetuated by traditional gender roles, although the link between such roles, inequalities and the gender gap is not always clear, despite being widely assumed. While a full discussion lies beyond the scope of this analysis, it should be mentioned that the issues surrounding women’s career choice and progression, female leadership and the gender pay gap are more nuanced and fragmented. For instance, Hakim’s Preference Theory (2000) suggests that women’s career choices are shaped by personal lifestyle preferences, particularly in contexts where genuine choice is available. A decade later, in a similar vein, Sommers (2013) emphasizes the centrality of individual choice and personal agency. Conversely, critics like McRae (2003) and Leahy and Doughney (2014) argue that these choices are constrained by persistent gender norms, structural inequalities and economic pressures.

These debates point to a central tension in gender equality discourse: the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. Recent contributions by economists offer further insight into how institutional and workplace dynamics perpetuate inequality. Notably, Claudia Goldin, recipient of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, addresses the persistent gender disparities in labour outcomes through the concept of “greedy work” (2021). This phrase encapsulates high-paying jobs that demand long and inflexible hours, which can be challenging for individuals with caregiving responsibilities, a role traditionally more often taken on by women. The phenomenon, which has significant implications for gender dynamics in the workplace, results in far fewer women than men in top positions and undermines couple equity in families with children. As women are more likely to seek flexible work arrangements to balance personal and professional responsibilities, their career progression and leadership potential are adversely affected by breaks and gaps. Even welfare policies – though well-intentioned – can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender divisions, particularly through family policies (like extended maternity leave) that may unintentionally hinder women’s long-term career progression (Esping-Andersen 1999, 2009).

Counterintuitive evidence also emerges from data on the gender wage gap, the percentage difference in average earnings between men and women. Using the year 2023 as a measurable indicator of inequality, data from Eurostat reveal that Member States with more traditional gender roles and family values do not necessarily exhibit worse wage disparities. For instance, gender pay gaps are relatively lower in countries such as Bulgaria (13.5%), Croatia (7.4%),

Poland (7.8%), Italy (2.2%), and Romania (3.8%) than in some more progressive Member States, such as Germany (17%), Denmark (14%), France (12%), the Netherlands (12.5%), and Finland (16.8%). This complexity suggests that blanket statements describing traditional values as inherently harmful to gender equality risk oversimplification.

In sum, this body of literature underscores the need to approach gendered economic inequality as the product of both institutional structures and individual agency. While economic violence is often associated with vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, the concept of “greedy work” reframes inequality as systemic, affecting even well-paid, highly qualified women constrained by the inflexibility of labour markets. Structural barriers such as caregiving expectations, rigid work norms and family policies that inadvertently penalize women’s careers all contribute to persistent gender disparities. A nuanced analysis should therefore move beyond binary framings of traditional versus progressive values, and instead consider how intersecting economic, social and cultural forces shape divergent outcomes across the EU.

4.1 Proactive policy discourse

As proof of von der Leyen’s commitment, it has been argued that her Gender Equality Strategy “proposes measures meant to close gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy, addressing the gender pay and pension gap, and closing the gender care gap” (Debusscher 2023, 96). However, the pandemic compelled the Union to devise a dedicated instrument to mitigate the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, which took the form of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) Regulation. In order “to tackle the adverse effects and consequences of the COVID-19 crisis in the Union” (Recital 8), the RRF Regulation promotes “gender equality and equal opportunities for all” with the goal of building “resilient economies” and “resilient societies” (examples 13 and 14).

- (13) The COVID-19 crisis as well as the previous economic and financial crisis have shown that developing sound, sustainable and resilient economies as well as financial and welfare systems built on strong economic and social structures helps Member States respond more effectively and in a fair and inclusive way to shocks and recover more swiftly from them. (Regulation (EU) 2021/241, Recital 6)
- (14) Gender equality and equal opportunities for all, and the mainstreaming of those objectives should be taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of recovery and resilience plans submitted pursuant to this Regulation. Investment in robust care infrastructure is also essential in order to ensure gender equality and the economic empowerment of women, in order to build resilient societies,

combat precarious conditions in a female-dominated sector, boost job creation, prevent poverty and social exclusion, and in order to have a positive effect on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as it allows more women to take part in paid work. (Regulation (EU) 2021/241, Recital 28)

As explicitly stated, the RRF Regulation incorporates gender mainstreaming as a horizontal objective which should be integrated across all measures and reforms included in the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) of Member States. Some of them have included forms of mainstreaming in the shape of investments in childcare infrastructures, adult education to improve women's employability, initiatives to enhance women's financial literacy, measures to promote financial inclusion through fintech solutions which target women usually underserved by traditional financial services, provisions for funding female entrepreneurs, from reductions in the tax wedge to financial incentives. Examples of such measures can be found in the plans of Belgium, Estonia, Spain, Italy and Austria, among others. These provisions aim to ensure that the recovery efforts not only address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but also contribute to reducing gender inequalities (European Parliament 2022b).

However, the actual incorporation of gender equality into the RRF Regulation was not an immediate process but underwent political contentions and discursive struggles. Gender mainstreaming required subsequent steps and robust parliamentary advocacy. Moreover, consensus on gender equality policy was not unanimous, with dissenting opinions from radical right populists. Amid these challenges, the RRF instrument lost some of its momentum. In fact, "calls for gendered policy perspectives were not silenced. But they were integrated only to the extent that they did not challenge dominant economic priorities" (Elomäki and Kantola 2021). Policy implementation was also fraught with controversies, with nationalist and extreme-right MEPs opposing or abstaining on gender-specific policies, such as the gender aspects of the energy crisis, women's poverty or "when it came to promoting women on company boards" (Ska 2024).

Donà observes that EU requirements for national plans place too much emphasis on increasing female employment and stimulating economic growth, as a result shifting "gender equality [...] from being a contested political issue to being a strategic government goal to be achieved as part of the NRRP's milestones and targets" (2022, 467). Though this argument is specifically formulated in the context of the Draghi agenda and the Italian NRRP, it can be extended to the ways in which gender equality has become normalized over the years, with the EU opting for the less radical and transformative gender mainstreaming discourse, especially in some areas where it fitted with other economic and social policy goals (Lombardo and Meier 2008; Stratigaki 2005). The discussion of the productive sector often overlooks critical aspects

of intersectionality and the broader rights of more vulnerable groups. Moreover, insufficient employment opportunities and inadequate wages can substantially impede women's progress.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the discursive construction of gender mainstreaming during von der Leyen's first mandate, against a backdrop of unprecedented societal disruption in Europe that continues to this day with the war in Ukraine. It shows that the COVID-19 pandemic was a triggering factor for problems that have long been shaped by the prioritization of the labour market, often resulting in a "de-gendering of issues" (Lombardo and Meier 2008, 119).

The corpus-assisted discourse analysis of a selected collection of EU political, institutional and legal documents that address gender equality and gender-sensitive recovery measures has revealed significant strides and ongoing challenges in promoting gender equality. While gender equality is discursively framed both as a value and a pragmatic requirement for economic growth, the rhetorical strategies tend to emphasize opportunity over structural critique, particularly in high-level political discourse. Corpus-assisted insights, supported by CDS methods, reveal a consistent reliance on nominalization, stative verb structures and selective agency, often framing inequality as persistent yet depersonalized. Legal texts and supporting institutional documents show greater referential grounding, yet remain fragmented in their approach to data and responsibility. Despite aspirations to inclusivity, the intersectional dimension remains underdeveloped, with "diversity" invoked more often than elaborated, also with regard to men. Ultimately, gender mainstreaming appears as a discursive balancing act: aligning normative commitments with economic rationales, while navigating the institutional pressures of agenda-setting, implementation and symbolic affirmation.

As shown in this analysis through selected linguistic evidence, the discursive orientation of the European Commission largely continues to reflect this value perspective, which was often gender-blind in the past and thus partly responsible for discrimination and the cumulative negative effects exposed by the pandemic. Nonetheless, an institutional commitment to gender equality is now observable, quite strong under von der Leyen's first presidency, and to be monitored during her more narrowly defined second mandate. Besides the often-stated observation that women's labour is a driver for economic growth, this commitment builds on the positive evidence of the overall progress achieved in female education – with more female university graduates in Europe than men – and on the factual recognition that women, and especially those who are victims of gender-based violence, struggle to escape marginalization and abuse without financial independence.

In this regard, the RRF Regulation has been a key tool in addressing gender disparities, integrating gender equality into all policy areas, mainstreaming it in words and deeds and urging Member States to comply with its goals in their national plans. Its measures include important provisions such as promoting female employment, economic empowerment and financial literacy, as well as investing in childcare infrastructure and supporting female entrepreneurs.

Although much progress has been made, the overall picture remains mixed. Country-specific differences reveal varying levels of success in policy implementation. Some areas, especially in welfare, remain under-addressed and would benefit from an intersectional lens that recognizes the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of women. They include the reintegration of older women into the workforce, the feasibility of job retention schemes, and pension plans that redistribute benefits between parents, to name a few. After the pandemic, mental health support should also be considered in depth, with an eye to societal well-being. A subtle yet persistent under-recognition of women endures. While the term “disproportionately” in policy discourse conveys moral urgency and offers a strong justification for intervention, it is often used without adequate evidence or contextual nuance. Resilience is typically associated with society at large, but the recognition of women – especially essential workers during the pandemic – remains generic and understated in the documents here analyzed. This omission appears to reflect a broader societal tendency to overlook the full value of each citizen in their unique diversity, especially ordinary individuals. Ultimately, these gaps reveal that societies within the European Union continue to struggle not only to change their minds, but also their hearts.

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Bionote

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Appendix 1: List of corpus documents

(available in open access at https://doi.org/10.13130/RD_UNIMI/N8QGER)

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