

# The good mother, and modern politician <sup>[1]</sup>

The Female Factor

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

- In Germany, a tradition falls, and women rise <sup>[2]</sup>

- Video feature: Four working mothers in Germany <sup>[3]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

What irritates conservatives in her conservative party about Ursula von der Leyen is that she possesses what in modern Europe pass for impeccable conservative credentials: She is married, says grace every evening and has seven children.

So when this popular minister subsidizes fathers to care for children, or taps her bottom when asked by the Munich newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* what body part she looks at first in a man, it is that much harder to attack her.

Peter Ramsauer from the Bavarian sister party of the Christian Democrats tried, grumbling that men did not need "a diaper-changing internship." Maria Eichhorn, a longtime Bavarian member of Parliament, warned that the minister threatened the institution of marriage.

But Ms. von der Leyen, 51, just breezed past the criticism and kept talking about her family: About how her Ph.D. in medicine and her career did not stop her from giving birth. About how her husband, a professor of medicine, worked part time for years to be with the children, now aged 10 to 22.

In a country where statistically women have 1.38 children and only 6 percent of mothers return to full-time work after their second child, Ms. von der Leyen - first family minister and now in charge of labor - beggars belief.

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She was not always so certain. Back when she had three children and was a part-time doctor trying to work around a village kindergarten in northern Germany that closed at 1 p.m., her husband got a scholarship to Stanford University. The family moved to California for four years, carrying emotional baggage.

"We arrived from Germany ridden with guilt," she recalls. "I was worried about being a bad mother. My husband was worried about whether he should work even harder."

The years in California, where she studied health economics and did research at Stanford, were a turning point. "It was the first time that I was not criticized as a mother for wanting to work or as a professional for having children," she said. "On the contrary, the attitude in America was: You have children, that's great. Now get to work because you have to pay for college."

"It was liberating," she said. So liberating that she had another four children and in 2001, went into politics.

A year later, she was family minister of her home state of Lower Saxony, and in 2005 Chancellor Angela Merkel brought her to Berlin. Ms. von der Leyen became a national star, overtaking many in her party who had served years in hopes of a similar career vault.

Since then, she has striven to remake her country somewhat in her image. If Germany does not accommodate educated women who want children and a career, those women will quit Germany. "When the signal is: If you have children, you're out, then women who want to work have two options: Either they have no children or they emigrate," she said. She hopes the "female brain drain" is averted. "Things are changing dramatically. When my daughters are grown up, they will say: 'Where was the problem?'"

- reprinted from the International Herald Tribune

**Related link:** OECD Germany Country Note <sup>[4]</sup>

**Region:** Europe <sup>[5]</sup>

**Tags:** gender <sup>[6]</sup>

mother's labour force participation <sup>[7]</sup>

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