

SMEs' Priorities for Implementing the Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030

Key messages

SMEUnited supports the objectives of the new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 and considers the economic empowerment of women to be particularly important. Increasing women's participation in the labour market and strengthening their opportunities to create, lead and grow successful businesses are essential to achieving sustainable growth and competitiveness.

In this context, SMEUnited underlines that gender equality should also be recognised as a key driver of economic resilience, productivity and long-term demographic sustainability across the European Union.

To achieve these objectives SMEUnited believes that the European Commission should:

- **Support** the Think Small First principle by ensuring that future policies are designed from the outset to the specific realities and needs of SMEs.
- **Support** the role of social partners and collective bargaining in advancing gender equality and fostering inclusive working environments.
- **Improve** access to finance, skills development, and training opportunities tailored to women entrepreneurs, particularly for SMEs.
- **Strengthen** EU financial support for care infrastructure and services while involving SME employer organisations in the design and dissemination of family friendly workplace models.
- **Provide** SMEs with simplified, free of charge and easily accessible operational guidance, practical templates, and models, to combat gender based violence and harassment in the workplace.
- **Safeguard** SMEs' access to EU funding by keeping application and reporting requirements simple and proportionate.

- **Allocate** targeted financial support to women's entrepreneurship within EU funding programmes.

General Remarks

SMEUnited welcomes the efforts undertaken by the European Commission to advance gender equality across the European Union. From SMEUnited perspective, despite the progress achieved in recent years, women continue to face a number of structural barriers that limit their full participation in the labour market and entrepreneurial success. These include lower employment rates, greater difficulties in accessing finance and financial literacy tools, barriers to business creation and growth, a higher prevalence of part-time work, and a disproportionate share of care and family responsibilities. Such obstacles continue to affect women's economic independence and professional development, while also limiting the full potential of Europe's labour market.

In this context, SMEUnited welcomes the objectives set out in the Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030. At the same time, SMEUnited emphasises that the successful implementation of the Strategy must fully take into account the realities and capacities of SMEs, key actors in promoting gender equality, which often operate with limited financial, administrative, and human resources.

In this regard, SMEUnited underlines the importance of consistently applying the “Think Small First” principle¹ throughout the full implementation of the Strategy. The principle urges policy makers to ensure policies are designed from the outset with SMEs in mind, ensuring that progress towards gender equality can be achieved without creating disproportionate administrative burdens or legal uncertainty for smaller businesses. This principle should remain central across all future initiatives stemming from the Strategy.

This position paper sets out SMEUnited's key priorities and proposals for achieving the objectives of the Strategy in a way that both advances gender equality across the Union and supports the sustainable functioning and competitiveness of SMEs. This paper builds on SMEUnited's position published ahead of the Strategy².

In implementing the Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030, SMEUnited asks the European Commission to:

¹ SMEUnited, *Think Small First (TSF) Charter*, [Link TSF Charter | SMEUnited](#).

² SMEUnited, *EU Gender Equality Strategy Post-2025*, *SMEUnited input to increase women economic empowerment in the EU*, [EU Gender Equality Strategy Post-2025 | SMEUnited](#)

- **Support** the Think Small First principle by ensuring that future policies are designed from the outset to the specific realities and needs of SMEs.
- **Support** the role of social partners and collective bargaining in advancing gender equality and fostering inclusive working environments.

Roadmap Principle 3: Equal pay, economic empowerment and financial independence

SMEUnited welcomes the attention given to women's entrepreneurship in the Strategy. However, this dimension, which is fundamental to ensuring women's economic independence, should be given greater prominence. Women's entrepreneurship should be recognised a matter of social balance, and as a structural driver of growth, competitiveness, and innovation within the European economy. These businesses contribute to economic value creation and social cohesion, often combining strong local roots with innovation and adaptability. They play an important role in challenging stereotypes and promoting reliable role models for future generations.

Data from the Research Office of Confartigianato Imprese shows that by the end of 2025, Italy counted more than 1.3 million women led businesses, accounting for over one fifth of the total business population, with a significant presence in the craft sector³. Despite progress, important challenges remain. Women entrepreneurs continue to face structural barriers, including difficulties in reconciling professional and family responsibilities, limited access to finance and training, and the need for more supportive welfare systems. Fostering balanced participation in both employment and entrepreneurship is key to strengthening sustainable growth and innovation, particularly in SMEs and the craft sector. This is especially important in light of persistent labour and skills shortages across the EU.

SMEUnited asks the European Commission to:

1. **Improve** access to finance, skills development, and training opportunities tailored to women entrepreneurs, particularly to strengthen managerial, digital, and leadership skills, as well as innovation capacity and access to markets. This should be achieved through EU funding programmes such as the European Social Fund Plus for training and capacity building on equality, as well as dedicated calls within the ESF, ensuring clearly accessible funding lines for smaller businesses.
2. **Support** the scaling-up and diversification of women-led SMEs into higher value-added sectors

³Le donne trainano crescita con 1,3 milioni di imprenditrici, 218mila sono artigiane, Confartigianato Imprese, <https://confartigianatoimpresa.net/le-donne-trainano-crescita-con-13-milioni-di-imprenditrici-218mila-sono-artigiane/>

3. **Facilitate** the exchange of best practices and successful models of women led entrepreneurship across the European Union.
4. **Support** the development of mentoring programmes and the promotion of female role models.

Roadmap Principle 4: Work-life balance and gender equality in care

While SMEUnited supports the Commission's emphasis on accessible to care services, a more ambitious and comprehensive approach is needed. Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities, often at the expense of their professional development.

Policies that support long-term care, career continuity, flexible working arrangements, and health protections for working mothers are fundamental in order to raise the number of women participating in the labour market⁴.

SMEUnited asks the European Commission to:

1. **Strengthen** EU financial support for care infrastructure and services through Cohesion Policy funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, promoting the development of affordable, high quality care services co-financed at local, regional, or national level.
2. **Involve** SME employer organisations in the design and dissemination of family friendly workplace models that reflect the realities of small businesses, while providing economic incentives for SMEs to adopt such practices.
3. **Reinforce** paid parental leave schemes for fathers in order to promote a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities.
4. **Support** the exchange of voluntary frameworks, best practices and social partner initiatives that improve working conditions for caregivers, such as maternity friendly workplace codes.

Roadmap Principle 5: Equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions

⁴ Example: Italy's Maternity Friendly Code (Codice per le imprese in favore della maternità): <https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/parita-di-genere-ed-empowerment-femminile/codice-per-le-imprese-in-favore-della-maternita/>

SMEUnited welcomes the attention given to combating gender based violence and harassment in the workplace and supports the objective of ensuring safe, respectful, and inclusive working environments.

Social partners have long recognised the importance of fostering a workplace culture grounded in dignity, mutual respect, and fairness, where any form of harassment or violence is unacceptable. Collective bargaining has played a central role in translating these principles into concrete measures. Multiple national agreements already include several provisions to prevent and address harassment.

At European level, the Framework Agreement on harassment and violence at work of 26 April 2007 remains a key reference point. It has helped to raise awareness, clarify unacceptable behaviours, and reinforce the role of social partners in addressing these issues. Its implementation reflects the strong commitment of employers and workers to preventing and tackling workplace violence and harassment.

Building on these efforts, the implementation of the new Gender Equality Strategy should fully recognise and draw on solutions already developed at national and sectoral level. The Strategy should promote preventive and corrective measures within workplaces, focusing on soft law instruments that are particularly suitable for SMEs, as they enable effective and flexible responses adapted to different organisational contexts.

SMEUnited urges the Commission to ensure that any new measures remain practical, workable, and aligned with the realities of SMEs, encouraging integrated approaches that combine prevention, victim protection, and effective reporting and support mechanisms. Overly detailed procedural requirements should be avoided. Practical tools such as the Online Interactive Risk Assessment tool developed by EU OSHA provide a strong example of an SME friendly approach. Future initiatives should build on such models, ensuring that SMEs have access to free, user friendly tools and guidance that support effective implementation without creating unnecessary administrative burdens.

SMEUnited asks the European Commission to:

1. **Provide** SMEs with simplified operational guidance, practical templates, and models, including basic equality plans, harassment prevention protocols, and tools for the proper identification and management of conduct as well as for risk assessment, that are free of charge and easily accessible. These materials should be concise, user friendly, use clear non-legal language, and could include short protocols, infographics, videos, and practical case studies.
2. **Avoid** overly detailed procedural obligations that would create excessive administrative burdens for small businesses.

3. **Support** national social partners in providing training, guidance, and awareness raising initiatives, while sharing workplace protocols and training for early detection and response. These activities should be supported for example through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme or the future AgoraEU.

Roadmap Principle 8: Institutional mechanisms that deliver on gender equality

SMEUnited welcomes the intention to strengthen gender mainstreaming aspect in the EU budget under the 2028 to 2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, including the development of a methodology to track expenditure supporting gender equality and the introduction of gender disaggregated performance indicators. These measures can improve the transparency and effectiveness of public policies and help ensure that EU funding better supports gender equality objectives.

At the same time, it is essential that these developments do not lead to excessive complexity in application procedures, disproportionate reporting requirements, or the need to establish burdensome data collection systems. SMEs are key participants in EU funding programmes, and their access must be safeguarded.

Furthermore, SMEUnited calls for the EU budget to include targeted support measures to women entrepreneurship, recognising its contribution to growth, innovation, and social cohesion. This support should reflect the specific characteristics of women led SMEs, facilitating access to finance, supporting business development and innovation, and addressing persistent gaps in access to funding. In this context, the proposed introduction of dedicated support within the European Competitiveness Fund is a positive step forward.

SMEUnited asks the European Commission to:

1. **Safeguard** SMEs' access to EU funding by keeping application and reporting requirements simple and proportionate, and providing clear guidance and practical support to help SMEs comply with gender related requirements.
2. **Allocate** targeted financial support to women's entrepreneurship within EU funding programmes, tailored to the needs of women led SMEs, including improved access to finance and support for growth and innovation.
3. **Create** programmes that support women entrepreneurs in applying for public procurement contracts (i.e. guidelines, workshops).
4. **Develop** quantitative gender indicators adapted to SMEs through simplified and proportionate approaches that reflect their capacity. These could include the proportion of women in the workforce and in positions of responsibility using simple categories, a simplified overall gender pay gap indicator without complex statistical requirements, the

presence of basic workplace measures such as harassment protocols, work life balance policies, and access to training, as well as indicators on access and retention such as turnover by gender and return rates after care related leave. These indicators should support continuous improvement rather than sanctions and should primarily serve to guide policy development and targeted support for SMEs. The collection of data should be based on the "once-only" principle, ensuring that SMEs do not have to provide the same information repeatedly, thus preventing unnecessary administrative burdens and additional reporting requirements.

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