SME4SPACE Gender Equality Plan

(*September 2026*)

Introduction

SME4SPACE is a not-for-profit organisation located in Leuven, Belgium. As SME4SPACE has a limited activity as small private research centre, a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is recommended (including by the European Commission as part of Horizon Europe[1]).

As SME4SPACE does not have any employees at the time of writing, but instead hires consultants on a project level basis, the GEP will focus on addressing the gender balance and equality for what concerns the hired consultants for the implementation of the different projects and initiatives. Moreover, the gender balance at board level will be analysed. These analyses will also be compared to the 2022 GEP. As gender is only one aspect of diversity that can influence biases and discrimination, this GEP will be constructed through an intersectional lens where possible[2].

As gender equality is a fundamental value of the European Union, SME4SPACE is committed to reach a gender equality. Throughout the plan and the relative reviews of it, objectives and desired outcomes of the GEP will be identified with relevant baseline data and targets in addition to details of the actions that were, are or will be taken by SME4SPACE, including the allocation of dedicated resources.

Expertise and resources

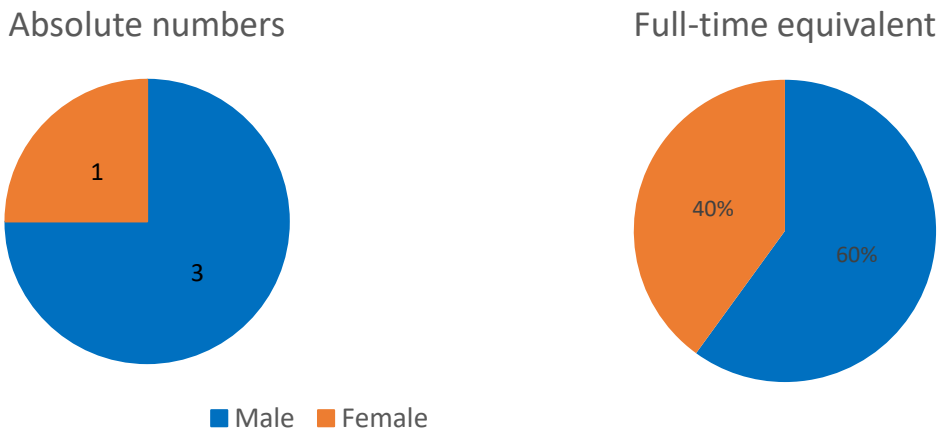
As SME4SPACE is based in Belgium, the information published by The Institute for the equality of women and men is consulted on a regular basis.
While the company (in September 2026) consists of three people, of which only one fulltime, the company does not have a dedicated team specialising in diversity and equality. However, the consultants do possess knowledge and expertise of these topics, including a background in Gender & Diversity and gender mainstreaming practices.

SME4SPACE gender composition

2022
In September of 2022 there were four consultants in force at SME4SPACE, with two of them committed for four days per week and two for one day per week depending on

[1] European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. (2025). *Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans (GEPs)*. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/8336488.
[2] See the European Commission Gender equality strategy 2026-2030: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

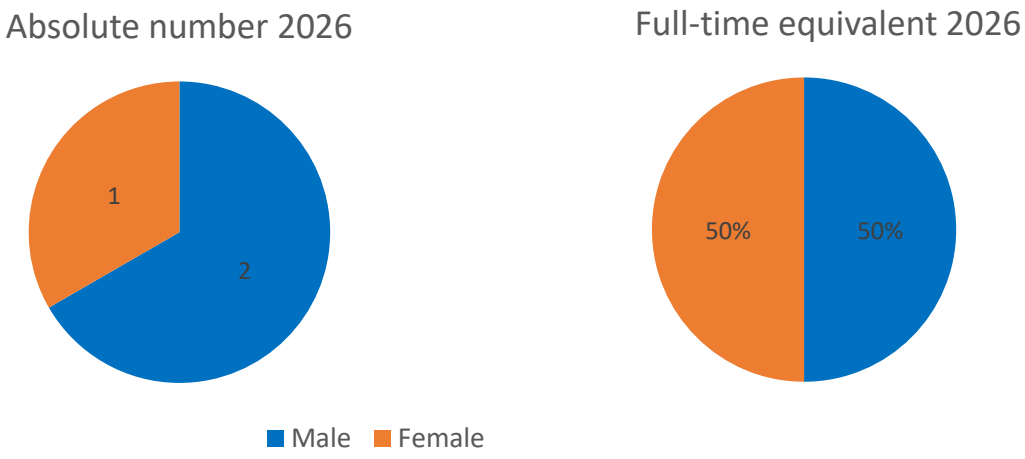
projects/initiatives. In terms of gender, this was one woman working for four days per week; three men of which one man working four days per week and the other two men working one day per week.
This amounted to 60% men and 40% women in full-time equivalent.



2026

As of September of 2026, there are three consultants contracted at SME4SPACE – one woman and two men. In terms of days per week, the woman works five days per week, one man works four days per week, and one man works one day per week. This amounts to two full-time equivalents with 50% women and 50% men.

Two out of the three consultants are from Belgium, the third consultant from Italy. While this means a decrease in diversity in terms of country of origin, this is partially explained by the lower number of consultants present, as well as SME4SPACE being located in Belgium and thus being more likely to attract people there.

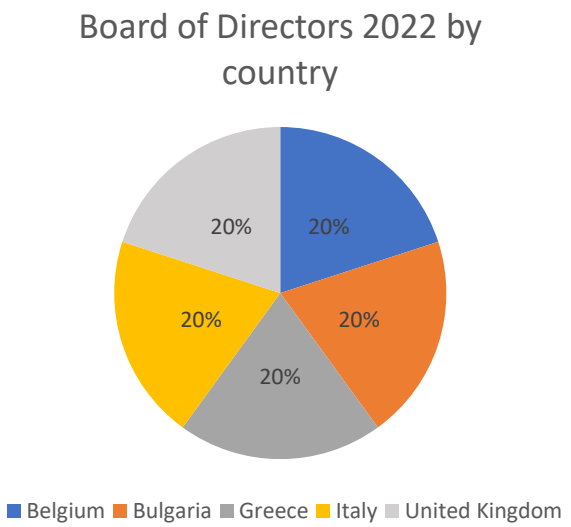


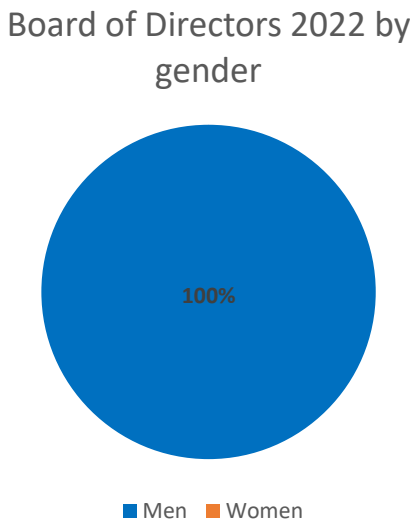
Work life balance and organisational culture

As mentioned above in the introduction, SME4SPACE does not have employees but rather hires consultants on a project-basis. The independent contractors are themselves responsible for determining how to balance their professional and personal commitments, allowing them a high degree of flexibility in organising their work. This approach enables consultants to adapt their workload and working hours according to their individual circumstances and preferences.
At the same time, SME4SPACE aims to foster a culture of trust, autonomy and mutual respect through open communication among team members and a respect for the working times and time off of each member. Regular coordination meetings help ensure objectives are met while maintaining a healthy working environment.

Gender balance in leadership and decision-making

2022
SME4SPACE is led by its chairman and board of directors. Previously, the board included one chairman and four directors, all men. It was clear then that a more balanced representation was needed among the directors.
In terms of country of origin there was more diversity: all five members had different backgrounds, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom. As SME4SPACE represents the European space sector this divide is beneficial, while other continents outside of Europe are necessarily underrepresented.

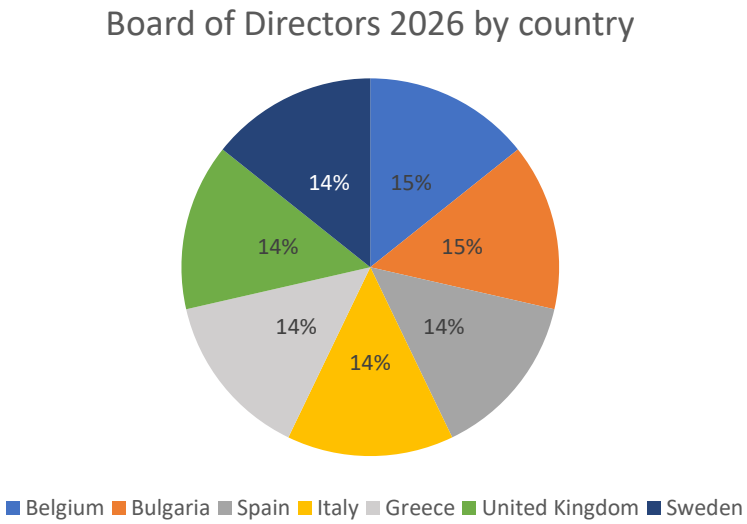


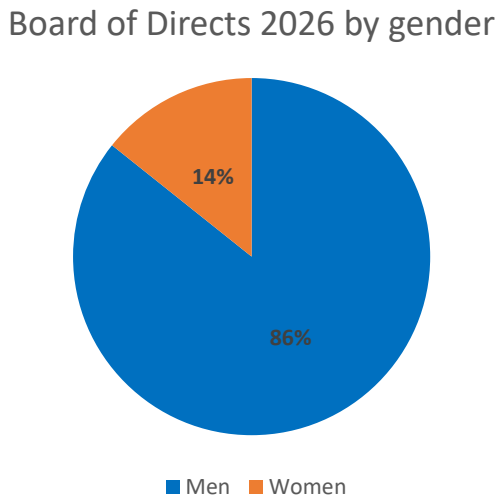


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2026

The board currently consists of 6 men (including the chairman) and 1 woman[3], with special attention given in 2026 to include more women, younger members, and to uphold the diversity from different countries. It is worth noting that the directors are nominated by the SME4SPACE General Assembly mainly from proposals coming from the SME4SPACE Working Members, meaning Associations/Clusters, that often propose their Presidents, Chairs or Directors. Thus, the SME4SPACE unbalanced representation in its board of directors mainly reflects the unbalanced representation of its Working Members.





The company structure outside of the strategy and policy indications of the board of directors is relatively flat. Meaning there is room for everyone to collaborate and contribute to the success of the association, being able to bring their expertise, knowledge, experience and ideas.

[3] For an up-to-date status of the Board of Directors, please see https://www.sme4space.org/board-of-directors/

Gender equality in recruitment and career progression

SME4SPACE aims for equal opportunities for hiring and promotion among all consultants and possible employees regardless of gender, sexuality, race or ability. While there are currently no official guidelines or procedures in place to guarantee a gender-blind approach during recruitment, the job titles/descriptions do not include gender. Job openings are published as widely as possible to reach many and diverse people.
As these jobs openings are often project-based, it leaves a lot of room for part-time work or for potential employees/consultants to schedule their working days around their needs. This is a positive step towards including more women, as they are more likely to work part-time[4].

A useful next step would be to create a standardized format for job openings/descriptions with eye for gender and equality, as well as implement standardized evaluation criteria and scores for interviewees, so as to avoid preconceptions and stereotypes.

Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content

As SME4SPACE is not a teaching institution and is not primarily focused on conducting research, the integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content is not a core area of its activities.

Nevertheless, SME4SPACE does aim to support gender equality and includes it in its research where possible. It has been - and remains - active in several research projects that include the gender dimension, among other diversity metrics. Through these activities, SME4SPACE seeks to ensure that different perspectives and experiences are considered when analysing challenges and developing recommendations. The consultants involved in these projects bring a wide range of expertise and professional backgrounds, including knowledge of gender equality, diversity, and intersectionality, which helps strengthen the inclusiveness and relevance of the work undertaken.

Review of Gender Equality Objectives for 2022-2025

For the period of 2022-2025, SME4SPACE aimed to reach the following defined according to the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Traceable) approach:

1. Better sex/gender staff representation trying to bring it around the 50% (current situation is 60% men and 40% women);
2. Increase the number of the women representation in the board of directors at least of 2 directors by the end of 2025 (current situation is 5 board members 100% men).

[4] Equinet European Network of Equality Bodies. (2016) How to build a case on Equal Pay. https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/media/documents/handbook_on_equal_pay_-_electronic_version-2.pdf

The first point was reached in terms of FTE, but not in absolute numbers. While this is an improvement, this is a point that needs to be taken into account during further recruitment phases.
The second point has improved, from no women to one woman present in the board of directors, but the goal of at least 2 female directors has not been reached.

Gender Equality Objectives for 2026-2029

Possible avenues of improvement following the SMART approach include but are not limited to:

- strengthening recruitment and decision-making processes with explicit integration of diversity measures to reach a 50% gender split in terms of absolute numbers in its staff,
- improving the gender balance within the board and governance structure to the initially envisioned 2 women in the board of directors by the end of 2029,
- Yearly data collection on
    - Staff numbers by sex/gender at all levels, by function and by contractual relation to the organisation;
    - Average numbers of years needed for women and men to make career advancements (per grade);
    - Wage gaps by sex/gender and job;
    - Numbers of women and men in decision-making positions;
    - Numbers of female and male candidates applying for distinct job positions;
    - Numbers of women and men having left the organisation in past years, specifying the numbers of years spent in the organisation;
    - Numbers of staff by sex/gender applying for/taking parental leave, for how long and how many returned after taking the leave;
    - Number of absence days taken by women and men and according to absence motive;
    - Number of training hours/credits attended by women and men.

As previously mentioned, SME4SPACE is a small and flat organisation. For this reason, even though is agreed and shared that a team approach would be preferable, only one responsible can be dedicated to this task. The responsibility of the GEP implementation is on the Chair of the Association.

Conclusion

Since the creation of the 2022 Gender Equality Plan, SME4SPACE has made positive progress towards a more balanced representation of women and men within its consultant team, reaching gender parity in full-time equivalent terms in 2026. The organisation has also taken steps to improve diversity within its governance structures by increasing the representation of women on the board of directors, while continuing to benefit from the international backgrounds and expertise of its members. However, there is still room for improvement which is indicated in the 2026-2029 objectives.

As a small organisation that operates primarily through project-based consultants, SME4SPACE relies on flexibility, mutual respect and equal opportunities as key principles. The organisation remains committed to ensuring that gender equality and diversity considerations are integrated into its practices and activities wherever relevant.

Leuven, 07/09/2026

Hans Bracquené
Chairman of the SME4SPACE
Board of Directors

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