EmpoWomen Open Call #2

Guidelines for Applicants

OPENING: 1st of October 2024
CLOSING: 2nd of December 2024 at 17:00 CET

Project Website: www.empowomen.eu

Open Call platform: Apply here

V1.0

01/10/2024

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List of Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
AWU	Annual Work Unit
BA	Business Angel
BAE	Business Angel Europe
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CTO	Chief Technology Officer
CV	*Curriculum Vitae*
EC	European Commission
EEA	External Evaluators Average
ESR	Evaluation Summary Report
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICT	Information and communication technology
IoT	Internet of Things
IPR	Intellectual Property Rights
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
ML	Machine Learning
NFT	Non-fungible token
OAS	Overall Average Score
OC	Open Call
OLAF	European Anti-Fraud Office.
P&L	Profit & Loss
PIC	Participant Identification Code
R&D&I	Research and Development and Innovation
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPL	Sploro
SWG	Startup Wise Guys
TECHUA	Tech Ukraine
VAT	Value-Added Tax identification number
VC	Venture Capital
VR	Virtual Reality

1. Executive Summary

The **main objective of EmpoWomen OC#2** is to actively involve women-led deep-tech early-stage startups in the widening areas. This call seeks to identify and choose promising startups to participate in the second edition of the EmpoWomen acceleration programme. The overarching goal is to offer support that nurtures the development and investment potential of these startups, with the ultimate aim of cultivating them into leading female figures in deep-tech innovation within Europe

The purpose of this document, "**Guidelines for Applicants**", is to provide clear and concise instructions to applicants for submitting proposals for the second open call of the EmpoWomen project (**OC#2**). This call **opens on <u>October 1st, 2024</u>, and closes on <u>December 2nd, 2024</u>**.

This document includes detailed information about the 2nd open call, such as eligibility criteria, evaluation procedures, and submission requirements, which have been carefully curated to ensure clarity and accuracy. It is intended **to assist potential applicants for the EmpoWomen OC#2.**

It is provided for information purposes only and is not intended to replace **the Sub-Grant Agreement**, where it is defined the framework of rights and obligations of the Contracting Parties for the development of the funded project. The Sub-Grant Agreement will be signed by the EmpoWomen coordinator, on behalf of the entire consortium, and each beneficiary of this open call.

2. EmpoWomen project.

EmpoWomen **funded by the European Union through its Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme**, seeks to overcome the obstacles faced by women in the field of R&D&I to improve equality in deep-tech entrepreneurship.

Despite consistent growth in the business world, women remain substantially underrepresented as entrepreneurs, particularly in Europe. In the deep-tech sector, currently valued at 700 billion EUR, women account for only 10% of patent applications, and less than 15% of startups are founded or co-founded by women.

EmpoWomen offers a unique programme for scaling up women-led companies with the objective to create an exclusive support programme for female founders and entrepreneurs leading deep-tech startups from widening-area countries to grow into tomorrow's female tech leaders and put women at the forefront of deep-tech in the world.

The initiative EmpoWomen is a **2-year programme (2024-2025) which consists of a unique acceleration and mentoring programme and includes non-repayable funding totalling 1,125 M EUR**, prizes and services to 25 women-led deep-tech companies selected through a competitive process from European emerging markets and the outermost regions and associated EU countries.

Sploro (SPL), TechUkraine (TECHUA), Business Angels Europe (BAE) and Startup Wise Guys (SWG), all together with **8 startup associations from the EU widening area** will run this innovative programme which will be the first to support deep-tech women-led companies. The selected women-led businesses will have access to a **6-month programme** consisting of a dedicated acceleration and investment readiness support service by SWG, webinars and events, together with specialist training and mentoring from Business Angels (BAs), combined with Demo days and direct connections with both Angel Investors and Venture capitals (VCs), offering the potential to access investment.

3. Open call 2 (OC#2) relevant dates

- 2nd Open call launch: **1st October 2024**

- Open call support channel: **1st October 2024 to 2nd December 2024**

- Deadline for submission: **2nd December 2024**

- Evaluation of proposals: **December 2024 – January 2025**

- Remote Interviews: **Mid-January 2025**

- Communication of results to applicants: **February 2025**

- Legal validation and Sub-grant agreement preparation: **February 2025**

- Start of the programme: **March 2025**

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4. Rules and Conditions

4.1   Eligible Beneficiaries

EmpoWomen focuses on supporting **women-led, deep-tech startups in Widening Areas, particularly at the early stages**. This section outlines the specific criteria and conditions that determine eligibility for potential beneficiaries. Below are the core definitions that guide the eligibility process:

1. **Startup:** a 'startup' should be understood as an SME, according to the EU definition of SMEs, in the early stage of its life cycle, including those that are created as spin-offs from university research activities, which aims to find innovative solutions and scalable business models, and which is autonomous within the meaning of [Article 2 and 3 of the Annex to Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC.](#)

2. **Early-stage:** For the purpose of the project, we would consider the following criteria to define an early-stage startup:

   o   Companies with +2 months of existence by submission, and that have been established and operating for not more than 6 years counting backwards from submission date and;

   o   Companies that have raised limited funding (up to 1 M EUR).

3. **Women Leadership Criterion:** EmpoWomen supports women in all their diversity, including cisgender and transgender women legally recognized as such. To meet the female founder or co-founder requirement, women applicants must provide evidence of being legally acknowledged as founders or co-founders of the company applying from an eligible country/region.

   Additionally, EmpoWomen requires substantial female leadership within the startup, with at least one woman holding a key role—whether as a co-founder, core management team member, or a board director. However, having women on the board alone is not sufficient; these board members must demonstrate a significant connection to the project or founding team, rather than simply representing incubators, accelerators, or VC firms.

4. **Companies located in the list of eligible countries and regions:** Only applicants legally established in any of the following countries/regions are eligible for funding:

   ▪   **Widening Area Countries:** Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

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- **Associated countries:** Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Georgia, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine.

- **Outermost regions:** Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion, Martinique, Mayotte and Saint-Martin (France) and the Canary Islands (Spain).

Should the definition of Widening Area be updated by the EU, our restrictions may change. The valid list will be the existing one at the time of the closure of the call.

5. **Deep-tech:** The startup must be engaged in the development of advanced and disruptive technologies. According to the EU regulation: "Deep-tech is technology that is based on cutting-edge scientific advances and discoveries and is characterised by the need to stay at the technological forefront by constant interaction with new ideas and results from the lab. Deep-tech innovation aims to provide concrete solutions to our societal problems by finding its source in a deep interaction with the most recent scientific and technological advances and by seeking to produce a profound impact in the targeted application technologies"[1].

The EmpoWomen call focuses on empowering startups that leverage cutting-edge deep-tech innovations to drive transformative change. The following list outlines the key technologies of interest for the OC#2:

TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION
Advanced Computing / Quantum Computing	It refers to next-gen technologies that surpass classical computing. Advanced Computing includes high-performance systems like supercomputers, while Quantum Computing leverages quantum mechanics to solve complex problems faster, with applications in cryptography or AI.
Advanced Manufacturing	Refers to the use of cutting-edge technologies including but not limited to automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, data analytics or 3D printing. It encompasses innovations that improve production processes by increasing efficiency, precision, and flexibility among others.
Advanced Materials	The research, development, engineering and production of advanced materials with engineered properties, including ceramics, high value-added metals, electronic materials, composites, polymers, and biomaterials
Aerospace, Automotive and Remote Sensing	It encompasses the development of advanced technologies for air and space travel, land-based vehicles, and sensor-based data collection systems. It includes innovations in aircraft, spacecraft, autonomous vehicles, and satellite systems, along with technologies used for environmental monitoring, navigation, and communication across a range of industries.

[1] European Innovation Council (EIC) Work Programme 2023. LINK

TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION
Artificial Intelligence (AI) & Machine Learning (ML)	These are transformative technologies driving Europe's digital future. AI refers to systems that can perform tasks requiring human-like intelligence, such as problem-solving, decision-making, and language understanding. ML, a critical subset of AI, enables machines to learn from data and improve autonomously.
Biotechnology and Life Sciences	It involves using biological processes and innovations to develop solutions in healthcare, agriculture, and environmental sustainability, advancing fields like genetics, bioengineering, and/or pharmaceuticals.
Communications and Networks, including 5G	It refers to technologies enabling high-speed data transmission and connectivity. 5G is the next-generation mobile network, offering faster speeds, lower latency, and greater capacity, crucial for innovations in smart cities, autonomous vehicles, and IoT. These systems support enhanced communication, data sharing, and real-time applications across industries.
Cybersecurity and Data Protection	This area focusses on the application of Deep-tech technologies to network and data security and protection. This includes the trustworthiness and certification of ICT products.
Electronics and Photonics	It refers to technologies that involve the control of electrical signals and light. Electronics focuses on designing circuits and devices for computing, communication, and automation, while Photonics deals with the generation, manipulation, and detection of light for applications like fibre optics, imaging, and laser systems.
Internet of Things, W3C, Semantic Web	This Deep-tech technological area focusses on the physical and network systems for Internet of Things; the communications protocols and data structure for embedded and interconnected devices and systems.
Robotics	Robotics includes development of hardware and software solutions for process and machine automation.
Semiconductors (microchips)	They are a core deeptech technology, enabling the creation of advanced electronic systems. They form the basis of modern computing, powering innovations in AI, quantum computing, and/or IoT.
Sustainable Energy and Clean Technologies	It refers to deeptech innovations focused on reducing environmental impact and promoting renewable energy sources. They encompass technologies such as solar, wind, and hydrogen energy, as well as carbon capture, energy storage, and smart grids.
VR, AR, Metaverse	These are immersive deeptech technologies that blend the digital and physical worlds. VR creates fully simulated environments, AR overlays digital elements onto the real world, and the Metaverse is an interconnected virtual space where users can interact through digital avatars.
Web 3.0, including	Web 3.0 represents the next generation of the internet, characterized by decentralization, user empowerment, and enhanced security. It integrates

TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION
Blockchain, Distributed Ledgers, NFTs	technologies such as Blockchain, which provides a secure and transparent way to record transactions; Distributed Ledgers, which enable tamper-resistant and transparent data storage across multiple locations; and NFTs, which represent unique digital assets and ownership rights.

4.2   Financial Support

The second call offers a total budget of €662,500. In addition to the financial grant, EmpoWomen provides support through mentoring, coaching, and networking opportunities, fostering an environment that helps achieve project objectives.

In this OC#2, EmpoWomen is dedicated to offering equity-free funding to empower **up to 14 women-led startups.** Each company can receive **up to €60,000** which is disbursed depending and based on the achievement of KPIs, participation in programme activities, and performance in the final demo day.

The programme also includes **three distinct vouchers** designed to enhance the entrepreneurial journey. These vouchers cover participation in EU tech summits, access to a dedicated company mentor, and an exclusive programme on business angel investment, facilitated by experienced angel investors with relevant expertise and geographical alignment.

The grant is disbursed throughout the EmpoWomen project using a **"flat rate" approach**. This means funding is gradually released based on the achievement of specific outcomes and milestones, rather than administrative justifications of time or expenses.

4.2.1 Funding and vouchers distribution

Payments and vouchers will be distributed in multiple stages throughout the project's timeline, contingent on the achievement of specified milestones, KPIs, and the attainment of specific results. These disbursements will occur in parallel with the execution of the acceleration program.

	MONTH 1	MONTH 3	MONTH 6
	Coaching Plan & KPIs definition	*Mid-term Review*	*Final Review*
Output	- D1. Individual Programme KPIs - Participation of the startup in the first event of the project, if it occurs within the first month of the program.	- Participate in at least 80% of the project acceleration activities until month 3. - Achievement of the established KPIs for month 3. - D2. Progress Report	- Participate in at least 75% of the project acceleration activities until month 6. - Achievement of the established KPIs for month 6. - Participation in the Final Demo day - D3. Final Report
Grant (€)	€5,000	€20,000	€20,000
Vouchers	- Vouchers will be unlocked progressively during the programme. Startups will be allowed to request the voucher depending on the stage of the programme reached.		

4.2.2   Payments conditions

Participation in project activities is mandatory. If the required participation percentage is not met, KPIs will not be reviewed, and the grant will be suspended.

Payments will be made based on the evaluation results of the deliverables, scheduled for the beginning of the months following the delivery (e.g., beginning of Month 2 and Month 4). The final payment to startups will be made when the consortium receives the final payment from the EC.

A 100% completion of the KPIs will trigger the correspondent payment at each stage. A lower completion rate will result in a proportional payment. If the KPIs are met by less than 50%, the payment will be retained until the end of the phase. If less than 25% of the KPIs are met, the team will be automatically disqualified from the programme.

More information will be provided to the selected applicants in the Sub-Grant Agreement.

4.2.3 Vouchers

- **Voucher 1.** *Access to Events:* Covering expenses for attending EU tech summits. Participation in at least 2 events per startup. Participation in these events (different from the Demo Day) will be coordinated and managed directly by the EmpoWomen consortium during the execution of the acceleration programme. Event's participation is mandatory. **Valued at €5,000 per startup**.

- **Voucher 2.** *Business Angels Investment Readiness Programme:* Dedicated programme on business angels' investment provided directly by real angel investors who have an overlap within their expertise/geography. **Valued at €2,400 per startup.**

- **Voucher 3.** *Mentoring:* up to 16 sessions of a dedicated mentor for the company. **Valued at €5,000 per startup.**

Vouchers will be directly paid by EmpoWomen consortium to the providers of services (events, mentors, etc.) The value of the vouchers is added on top of the cash received by the startups, never deducted.

4.2.4 Demo Day

The Demo Day, marking the conclusion of the programme, will provide beneficiaries with the opportunity to present their startups to both programme mentors and external judges. On this day, the EmpoWomen Awards Ceremony will also take place, where startups will be assessed on their performance and potential. **It is mandatory for all beneficiaries to attend in order to qualify for the final payment.** The top three startups chosen during this event will receive project prizes according to their ranking.

- **Prize#1:** €15,000

- **Prize#2:** €11,500

- **Prize#3:** €6,000

4.3   Activities that qualify for financial support

This section outlines the **specific activities that qualify for financial support under the EmpoWomen program**. Applicants are encouraged to incorporate these activities into their implementation plans, as they are crucial for ensuring the technical, commercial, and strategic success of the proposed project. Each activity should be clearly integrated into the proposal, demonstrating how it will contribute to the project's overall objectives and long-term viability of the startup.

- Developing and refining products/services.

- Improving design, and user experience.

- The development, testing, and validation of technical and economic viability of prototype systems (Minimum Viable Product - MVP).

- Design, development and/or refining of new products and services.

- Validation or constructive inquiry into existing or novel technical solutions.

- SW engineering aimed at adapting to new regulations, markets, technologies or improving software quality.

- Understanding user requirements and improving usability/inclusive design.

- Formal security proofs, security audits, setup and design of software testing and continuous integration.

- Necessary measures in support of (broader) deployability (e.g. packaging).

- Product-market fit and market validation activities.

- Upgrading the business model.

- Development or improvement of the business plan and growth strategy.

- Market research and internationalisation activities.

- Finding new partners and key stakeholders abroad.

- Investment roadshows and finding investors.

- Investment rounds preparation.

- Strategic consultancy services.

- Events attendance, including the ones organised during the project.

- Other activities that are relevant to adhering to robust business development and deployment practices.

- Project management is linked to project execution.

- Out-of-pocket costs for infrastructure essential to achieving the above.

4.4   Origin of Funds

Once an applicant has been selected for funding, **they will be required to sign a dedicated Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement with the EmpoWomen consortium**. It is important to note that the funds attached to the Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement come directly from the funds of the **Horizon Europe Project EmpoWomen**, which has been funded by the European Commission. Therefore, the funds remain the

property of the EU until the payment of the balance, which is managed by the project partners in EmpoWomen via European Commission Horizon Europe Grant Agreement Nº. 101120693.

The **Sub-Grantee Funding Agreement represents a significant commitment** from both the EmpoWomen programme and the sub-grantees who will receive funding. The relationship between sub-grantees and the European Commission through the EmpoWomen programme carries a set of obligations for the sub-grantees with the European Commission. These obligations will be outlined in the Sub-Grantee Agreement, which the selected applicants will need to review and agree to. It is the responsibility of the sub-grantees to ensure that they fulfil these obligations, and of the EmpoWomen consortium to inform about them.

All selected applicants should carefully review the terms of the agreement and ensure that they are able to meet their obligations to receive the funding and successfully carry out their project.

4.5   Number of companies to be funded

For the second open call, EmpoWomen aims to select up to 14 startups. The financing for each sub-granted project is allocated based on a lump sum scheme, reflecting the requirements outlined in the call text and the programme's duration. **The total budget for this call is €662,500**. The total funding limit for any single organization across all EmpoWomen calls is capped at €60,000. To reach this maximum, an organization would need to secure a €45,000 grant by completing the full programme and win an additional €15,000 as the first prize at the Demo Day.

The maximum funding any entity can receive from the supported actions under HORIZON-EIC-2022-STARTUPEU-01-01, including EmpoWomen, Ready2Scale, and D2XCEL, is capped at EUR 60,000 in total. Entities are eligible to apply for multiple actions; however, **the total funding across all actions cannot exceed this limit**. If selected, this cap may affect the grant awarded to selected applicants in various programmes, though they will remain eligible to receive additional acceleration support if needed.

4.6   Language

English is the official language for the EmpoWomen open call. Submissions in any language other than English will not be eligible for evaluation.

Additionally, **English is the sole official language throughout the entire implementation of the EmpoWomen programme**. This means that all requested documentation and deliverables must be submitted in English to be eligible. Programme activities will be conducted exclusively in English.

4.7 Documents format

Unless otherwise stated in specific questions of the application form, any document requested in any of the phases must be submitted **electronically in PDF format without printing restrictions.**

4.8 Multiple submissions

Only one application will be accepted for funding per organisation and founder. In the case a company/founder submits more than one application, all the applications submitted will be automatically excluded from the evaluation process.

4.9 Absence of conflict of interest

Applicants must not have any actual or potential conflicts of interest during the EmpoWomen selection process or the entire project duration. Any situations that could potentially influence the impartiality of the individuals taking part in the selection process, or during the project implementation, are considered conflicts of interest. These can include financial interests, personal relationships, or any other factors that could affect the applicant's ability to remain impartial. All cases of conflict of interest will be assessed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant EmpoWomen selection committee and consortium partners. **If an applicant is found to have a conflict of interest, this could result in the application being disqualified.**

It is important to note that **EmpoWomen consortium partners, their affiliated entities, employees, and permanent co-operators are not allowed to submit a proposal and therefore to receive any financial support through the open calls**, as this would violate the European Commission's regulations.

4.10 Ethical Issues

EmpoWomen strictly adheres to the fundamental ethical principles outlined in the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity". To ensure compliance, all applicants are required to acknowledge and accept our privacy policy and declaration of honour (ethics) during the submission process. This acknowledgment confirms that, by submitting the form, they accept the terms described in the provided text. No additional documents need to be uploaded; applicants are solely required to read and agree to the terms outlined when submitting the form.

During the evaluation process, **the EmpoWomen consortium may verify whether the self-assessment declaration aligns with the contents of the application**. In cases where clarification is needed, the consortium reserves the right to contact the beneficiaries. If an applicant indicates that their application

may have ethical issues, an ethics review will be conducted. Applications that fail to adequately address ethical concerns or privacy aspects will be rejected.

All applicants must thoroughly review and assess their applications for any potential ethical issues before submission. **Failure to comply with the ethical guidelines outlined in the "European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity" could lead to disqualification of the application.** Therefore, it is of utmost importance that all applicants take the necessary steps to ensure that their proposals meet the highest ethical standards.

4.11   Data Protection

EmpoWomen requires access to Personal and Entity Data in order to process and evaluate applications. As open call coordinator, SPLORO will act as the Data Controller for all data submitted through the Sploro platform for this purpose. To ensure the safety and security of this data, the Sploro platform has been designed and operates under strict compliance with The General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR). Therefore, all applicants are required to accept the Sploro Platform terms to ensure full coverage. For more information regarding the data privacy policy and security measures implemented by Sploro, please refer to their website at https://sploro.eu.

5. Proposal submission process

5.1   Submission platform

Submissions must be made through the **official online submission platform (SPLORO Platform)**, with the link available on the EmpoWomen project website. Only applications submitted directly through this online platform will be considered eligible.

Applicants will be provided with an editable **template of the application form** to prepare their application offline before entering the information into the form available on the SPLORO platform. Submitting this form template in any other format, via email, or through any other means will not be accepted for evaluation.

5.2   Modification of an application

If the applicant discovers an error in a submitted application or aims to improve the application, **the applicant may submit a new version provided the call deadline has not passed.** For this, the applicant must get in touch with the managers of the open call (SPLORO) at EmpoWomen to reopen the application through the support channel.

Applicants will be able to modify all answers of the application form as many times as needed until the deadline. **Please be aware that once opened, the applicants should send the form again, or it will not be evaluated**. Once resubmitted, only the last version received before the call deadline will be considered in the evaluation.

5.3   Support channel

EmpoWomen provides a dedicated support channel at helpdesk@empowomen.eu. **Responses to inquiries will be given within 72 hours.** To ensure a timely response, applicants should plan their submissions, accordingly, allowing at least 72 hours before the deadline if they expect an answer.

Please note that any emails sent outside the designated support channel will not be considered. All requests or inquiries related to the submission system, or the call must be directed through the official support channel. Requests or inquiries received less than two days before the call closes will not be considered or answered. Lack of response to an inquiry does not constitute grounds for an extension or re-evaluation of a submission.

5.4   Documents to be submitted

As already mentioned, **the application process will take place exclusively through the SPLORO platform**. Before starting, we recommend carefully reviewing the supporting documents of the call, including the Guidelines for Applicants and a preliminary version of the form.

A complete proposal comprises **3 components:**

- **Application form:** an online form divided in different sections: 1) Legal and Contact Information; 2) Company Description; 3) Excellence; 4) Impact; 5) Implementation; 6) Declarations.

- **CV** of the woman founder/co-founder.

- **Investors Pitch Deck:** PDF document containing information about the company. It must have the following sections: 1) Problem; 2) Company Purpose; 3) Solution; 4) Market Potential; 5) Competition; 6) Business Model; 7) Road map; 8) Team; 9) Investment; 10) Need for EmpoWomen Support. A template is provided through the Sploro platform.

Applicants must strictly adhere to the form provided by EmpoWomen consortium via Sploro platform, which defines sections and the overall length. Evaluators will be instructed not to consider extra material in the evaluation.

5.5   Application preparation

For the successful submission, applicants are strongly advised to follow these steps:

1. Check the **guidelines for applicants** to determine if your organisation is eligible for the programme.

2. Applicants are required to **apply online and answer all mandatory questions** (with no exception) at: LINK. Moreover, applicants must submit all the requested documents established in the call. The lack of any of the documents will negatively affect the eligibility of the applicant for the evaluation process. In addition, note that certain documents - which will be required for each applicant selected for the programme and signing a sub-grantee agreement - may take time to acquire. It is highly advisable that you read the **Section 6.4 & Section 6.5** and take into consideration the time needed to obtain these documents.

3. **Be concrete and concise**. Open questions have character limitations. Please examine all the open call documents and attend at least one of the online events promoted by the EmpoWomen programme to be prepared. Please, mark your calendars for our upcoming InfoDay:

   - **1st InfoDay:** October 17, 2024

   - **2nd InfoDay:** November 13, 2024

4. Only the submission within the Open Call duration will be accepted. There will not be any deadline extensions unless there is a Force Majeure situation (i.e., a major problem with the platform caused by the EmpoWomen consortium and not by the applicants, making the system unavailable for a long period). It is strongly advised not to wait until the last minute.

6. Proposal Evaluation and Selection Process

6.1 Application reception

Submissions will be done **ONLY** via the **[Sploro platform]**, and it will be the unique entry point for all application submissions. Applications submitted by any other means will not be considered nor evaluated. Only the documentation included in the submission will be considered by evaluators. A full list of applicants will be drafted containing their basic information for statistical purposes and clarity (which will be also shared with the EC for transparency).

The application reception will close on **02.12.2024, 17:00 CET.** There will not be any deadline extensions unless there is a Force Majeure situation, caused by the EmpoWomen consortium and not by the applicants, which renders the system unavailable.

6.2 Evaluation process

The evaluation process to be followed during the selection of the applicants is shown in the following figure. Before entering into the programme, a three-step evaluation will take place:
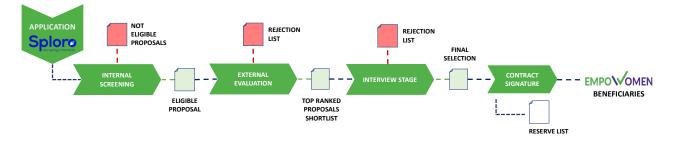

Figure 1. Evaluation process

6.2.1 Eligibility criteria

An automatic filtering to discard non-eligible proposals will follow the shortlist below. Eligibility criteria check will verify:

a) The proposing entity is a **legal entity eligible for EC funding** under the rules of Horizon Europe.

b) Companies with **+2 months of existence by submission**, and that have been established and operating for **not more than 6 years** counting backwards from submission date and

c) **Company classification as SME**. A SME will be considered as such if complying with the European Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC and, the SME user guide. In a summary, the criteria which define an SME are:

- o Independent (not linked or owned by another enterprise), by Recommendation 2003/361/EC.

- o Headcount in Annual Work Unit (AWU) less than 250.

- o Annual turnover less or equal to 50 million EUR OR annual balance sheet total less or equal to 43 million EUR.

d) The proposing entity is an **SME established in at least one of the eligible countries/regions**.

e) The startup is **founded or co-founded by women** holding a top management position (CEO, CTO or equivalent) in the company at the time of submission.

f) The startup is a **'deep-tech' company**.

g) Companies that have not raised more than 1M EUR in equity or public funding until submission date.

h) All the required fields in the online application form have been completed and all documents are uploaded.

i) The uniqueness of the proposal (proposal not already funded in the Women TechEU initiative and/or any other identical project to avoid double funding).

Applications marked as non-eligible will get a rejection letter including the reasons (a to i) for being declared as non-eligible. No further feedback on the process will be given.

6.2.2 Experts' remote evaluation

The proposals that pass the eligibility check will move to the remote evaluation stage. Proposals will be evaluated by 2 independent evaluators. Applications will be assessed by a group of external and independent evaluators with an entrepreneurial, investment or innovation background. They will be appointed only after the closure of call to select experts without risk of conflict of interest.

The evaluators selected will be completely independent from the organisations in the consortium and from any third party applying to the call. Before reviewing proposals, they will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure the privacy of the information they access. Additionally, each evaluation form includes

a statement confirming they have no conflicts of interest, which they must agree to and sign before proceeding with the evaluation.

The evaluators will assess the proposals based on 3 different evaluation criteria **(Excellence, Impact and Implementation).**

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION
EXCELLENCE	Projects must demonstrate high-quality, and a clear set of objectives aligned with the EmpoWomen vision and with the general objectives of the project. The following aspects will be evaluated: 1) Alignment of the application with the call and the EIC; 2) Degree of deep-tech innovation; 3) Current traction/implementation/achievements of the project
IMPACT	1) Quality of the future implementation plan; 2) Business plan; 3) Growth potential of the proposed innovation/solution; 4) Need of EmpoWomen support; 5) IPR
IMPLEMENTATION	Relevance of the female (co-)founder role in the company; 2) An overall gender balance and the position held by women in the startup; 3) Team's skills, motivation, and commitment to execute the project; 4) Quality and efficiency of the work plan.

The evaluators will score each award criterion on a scale from 0 to 5:

SCORE	DEFINITION
0	The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
1	**Poor** – criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2	**Fair** – proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
3	**Good** – proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	**Very good** – proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	The proposal **successfully addresses** all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

The total score will be calculated as an average of the score of the 3 different criteria. **The threshold for each criterion will be three (3), while the overall score threshold will be ten (10).** That means if a proposal receives less than 3 in one criterion or less than 10 overall score, will not be recommended for funding by the independent evaluators and will be automatically rejected.

6.2.3   Normalisation score

For calculating the final grade, each proposal will be reviewed by two independent evaluators. Each evaluator will score the proposal separately, without being aware of the score given by the other evaluator.

This process ensures that each evaluation is unbiased and not influenced by the other. The normalisation process counts with a several steps approach:

- **External Evaluators Average (EEA)** and **Overall Average Score (OAS):** each evaluator has evaluated several proposals. We calculate the average score of all applicants and compare it with the average score of each evaluator.

- Each External Evaluator Average is compared to the Overall Average Score using a simple division (EEA / OAS). As a result, we know the percentage each evaluator represents of the OAS. This has a double meaning:

  o Evaluators under 100% have a negative pattern against the average. Their scores are then increased.

  o Evaluators above 100% have a positive pattern against the average. Their scores are then decreased.

- **Correction factor:** Based on this formula 1 + (1 - (EEA/OAS)). This factor is unique for each evaluator.

- The following step is applying the Correction Factor to each criterion per evaluator. **Excellence x Correction Factor | Impact x Correction factor | Implementation x Correction factor.**

- Then we calculate the final score of each criterion as the average of each corrected score of the two evaluators on each proposal. (It may be the case that correction brings scores over a 5 in any criteria. In those cases, the score is capped in 5).

- We add the corrected scores and calculate the total score.

- Finally, we build the shortlist according from highest to lowest total score.

Using this method, a more balanced distribution of scores would be guaranteed, and the possibility of biases and distortions would be reduced.

At the end of the evaluation process, all proposals will be ranked based on their scores and top-ranked proposals will be invited to the interview stage.

6.2.4   Interview stage

Top-ranked projects from the external remote evaluation will be invited to participate in an online interview. Since the interview will be recorded, data protection will be strictly maintained. The purpose of

the interview is to gain a deeper understanding of the project concepts and the team's skills and competence. Each interview will be conducted by at least two external evaluators.

For this stage of the evaluation, the process is straightforward. Each evaluator will decide individually whether the proposal should advance, using a simple yes/no decision. Each 'yes' decision will add one point to the proposal's overall score and will contribute to updating the shortlist.

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores (15 points from remote evaluation + 2 points from interview maximum).

6.2.5   Final Selection

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores, and the best proposals will be invited to sign the sub-grant agreement and participate in the programme.

The list of accepted proposals at the interview will be published as well as the information about the noneligible proposals. All applicants will be informed about the evaluation results.

The criteria for the ranking of the proposals will be semi-automatic following the rules below:

- **Rule 1:** The proposals will be ranked based on their overall score.

- **Rule 2:** In case following Rule 1 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have higher score on the Excellence & Impact award criterion.

- **Rule 3:** In case following Rule 2 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have a higher score on the 3 Implementation and Use of resources of the proposed team innovation award criterion.

- **Rule 4:** In case following Rule 3 there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to the total number of women in the team.

The EmpoWomen consortium will then formally approve a list of proposals within the limits of the available funding.

Prior to contracting to the top ranked applicants, the consortium will ask for the approval of the European Commission, and the list of selected projects will be submitted to the European Commission for final screening. Once validated, the project will communicate the results and every applicant will receive via email: An Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) and a letter informing of the rejection decision or invitation to negotiation and following steps.

6.3   Appealing procedure

The EmpoWomen consortium has established a process that allows applicants to appeal the decision of the consortium in the event their proposal is not selected for funding. If, at any point during the evaluation process, an applicant believes that there has been a deficiency in how their proposal was assessed, which could potentially impact the final funding decision, or if they believe that the results of eligibility checks are incorrect and do not adhere to the Open Call rules, resulting in harm to their interests, the following appeal procedure is available.

- If clear evidence of a deficiency that could influence the ultimate funding decision exists, it is possible that all or part of the proposal will be subject to re-evaluation.

- Complaints must be submitted within **five (calendar) days** from the date of receiving the evaluation results.

- As a general guideline, the EmpoWomen Team will investigate complaints with the aim of reaching a decision to issue a formal notice or to close the case within no more than **twenty days from the date of receiving the complaint**, provided that all required information has been submitted by the complainant.

- In cases where this time limit is exceeded, the EmpoWomen team will inform the complainant via email. If a definitive response cannot be provided at that stage, the response will indicate when a definitive response will be furnished.

- It should be noted that the EmpoWomen consortium does not commit to engage in any further discussion regarding the evaluation of a proposal beyond the definitive response.

Please be aware that only one request for appeal per proposal will be considered by the consortium.

6.4   Validation of the legal entity

Before finalising the list of accepted applicants, we will conduct a thorough validation of the legal entities. This process involves submitting various documents to ensure compliance with the EmpoWomen programme's requirements. The required documents for validation include:

- To validate the identity and the power of attorney of the person who will sign the sub-grantee, EmpoWomen will ask for the **ID number and an ID scanned copy of the signatory**. On the scanned copy, personal information included on the ID card could be covered if not relevant for the contract signature such as religion, ethnicity and/or personal address. The picture, expiry date, name,

surname, gender, number of the document and nationality should be visible without exception. EmpoWomen will also ask for the **power of attorney** of the person who will sign the Sub-grantee agreement.

- **VAT Number registration** (if applicable), a copy of a document proving VAT registration (in case the VAT number does not show on the registration extract or its equivalent).

- **SME declaration:** form based on the standard templates by the EC in which the consortium can verify the ownership structure and financial figures to verify the size of the company.

- **Balance Sheet and P&L accounts for the last two closed years** (if applicable) and the most recent CAP table (shareholding distribution). In companies with linked or associated entities, additional information (accounts for mother companies, group trees, etc.) could be requested.

- For entities that are already **validated by the European Commission's Funding and Tenders Portal** that count with a registered and validated **PIC Number**, we will request the PIC Number and a screenshot of the Funding and Tenders portal in which it's evidenced the type of organisation which has been selected as a beneficiary.

- For entities without a validated PIC number OR without a validated status (like self- declared SMEs), we will request:

  - **Legal entity form.** The Legal Entity form for [private companies](#), and [public law bodies](#) necessary for the awarding of EU funding. Company Register, Official Journal and so forth, showing the name of the organisation, the legal address and registration number and date of registration.

A legal entity that does not provide the requested data and documents in due time will not be included in EmpoWomen Programme.

6.5   Sub-grant agreement preparation

After the validation of the Legal Entity, a written Sub-grantee agreement will be signed with successful applicants, and the EmpoWomen coordinator will request the applicant to fill a Financial Identification Form.

- **Sub-grantee funding agreement.** Signed between the Consortium (represented by the coordinator SPLORO) and the beneficiary.

- **Financial Identification Form (FIF).** Form identifying the account to which the funds will be transferred signed by the legal representative of the organisation and including a bank statement showing the ownership of the account. SPLORO, as project coordinator will also provide additional security measures to verify the ownership of the account.

All the legal issues are accurately covered by the planned contracts with the sub-granted beneficiaries. The sub-grant agreement will foresee, among other things, the special clauses derived from Horizon Europe in cascading granting, the payment schedule, and conditions (milestones), general legal text issues of rights and obligations by the EmpoWomen consortium and each sub-grantee, including IPR. It will also have a set of annexes such as the description of the project, the Financial Identification Form and any other document required by EmpoWomen consortium to assure the correct execution of the sub-granted projects.

The sub-granted projects will also define in the Individual Mentoring Plan their coaching plan and their research, business, and milestones linked to a set of KPIs, to which the project will associate the payment at the end of each phase. The objective of the contract preparation is fulfilling the legal requirements between the EmpoWomen consortium and every beneficiary of the call.

After signing the sub-grant agreement, beneficiaries will be eligible to participate in the EmpoWomen Acceleration Program.

7. Beneficiaries' Responsibilities

The selected organisations are indirectly beneficiaries of European Commission funding. As such, they are responsible for the proper use of the funding and ensure that the recipients comply with obligations under Horizon specific requirements. The obligations that are applicable to the recipients include:

7.1 Conflict of interest

Beneficiaries must take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the sub-project is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest ('conflict of interests').

They must formally notify to the EmpoWomen coordinator without delay any situation constituting or likely to lead to a conflict of interest and immediately take all the necessary steps to rectify this situation. The EmpoWomen coordinator may verify that the measures taken are appropriate and may require additional measures to be taken by a specified deadline.

If the sub-contracted consortium member breaches any of its obligations, the sub-contract may be automatically terminated. Moreover, costs may be rejected.

7.2 Data protection and confidentiality

During implementation of the sub-project and for four years after the end of the sub-project, the parties must keep confidential any data, documents or other material (in any form) that is identified as confidential at sub-contract signing time ('confidential information').

If a beneficiary SME requests, the EmpoWomen consortium may agree to keep such information confidential for an additional period beyond the initial 5 years. This will be explicitly stated at the sub-contract. If information has been identified as confidential during the sub-project execution or only orally, it will be confidential only if this is accepted by the EmpoWomen coordinator and confirmed in writing within 15 days of the oral disclosure. Unless otherwise agreed between the parties, they may use confidential information only to implement the Agreement.

7.3 Promotion of the action and EU Funding visibility

The beneficiary must promote their participation in the EmpoWomen project, and the benefits obtained as a result of participating in the programme. They will provide targeted information to multiple audiences

(including the media and the public) in a strategic and effective manner and to highlight the financial support of the EC.

The EmpoWomen Communication Team will guide, provide materials and support these communication activities. Unless the European Commission or the EmpoWomen coordinator requests, or agrees otherwise or unless it is impossible, any communication activity related to the action (including in electronic form, via social media, etc.), any publicity, including at a conference or seminar or any type of information or promotional material (brochure, leaflet, poster, presentation etc.), and any infrastructure, equipment and major results funded by the grant must:

- display the EU emblem;

- display the EmpoWomen logo.

When displayed in association with a logo, the European emblem should be given appropriate prominence. This obligation to use the European emblem in respect of projects to which the EC contributes implies no right of exclusive use. It is subject to general third-party use restrictions which do not permit the appropriation of the emblem, or of any similar trademark or logo, whether by registration or by any other means. Under these conditions, the Beneficiary is exempted from the obligation to obtain prior permission from the EC to use the emblem. Further detailed information on the EU emblem can be found on the Europa web page.

Any publicity made by the beneficiary in respect of the project, in whatever form and on or by whatever medium, must specify that it reflects only the author's views and that the EC or EmpoWomen project is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein. The EC and the EmpoWomen consortium shall be authorized to publish, in whatever form and on or by whatever medium, the following information:

- the name of the beneficiary;

- contact address of the beneficiary;

- the general purpose of the project;

- the amount of the financial contribution foreseen for the project; after the final payment, and the amount of the financial contribution actually received;

- the geographic location of the activities carried out;

- the list of dissemination activities relating to the foreground;

- the details/references and the abstracts of scientific publications relating to the foreground and, if funded within the sub-project, the published version or the final manuscript accepted for publication;

- the publishable reports submitted to the EmpoWomen consortium;

- any picture or any audio-visual or web material provided to the EC and EmpoWomen in the framework of the project.

The beneficiary shall ensure that all necessary authorisations for such publication have been obtained and that the publication of the information by the EC and EmpoWomen does not infringe any rights of third parties.

Upon a duly substantiated request by the beneficiary, EmpoWomen, if such permission is provided by the EC, may agree to forego such publicity if disclosure of the information indicated above would risk compromising the beneficiary's security, academic or commercial interests.

7.4   Financial audits and control

The European Commission will monitor compliance with the financial support conditions outlined in Annex 1 of the EmpoWomen Grant Agreement by beneficiaries and third parties. The EC may conduct financial audits, which may be conducted by external auditors or by EC services, including the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Beneficiaries must make all detailed information and data available to the EC or any authorized representative for audit purposes.

Moreover, the EC may at any time during the implementation of the EmpoWomen project and up to 5 (five) years after the end of the project, arrange for financial audits to be carried out, by external auditors, or by the EC services themselves including the European Anti-Fraud office (OLAF). The audit procedure shall be deemed to be initiated on the date of receipt of the relevant letter sent by the EC. Such audits may cover financial, systemic, and other aspects (such as accounting and management principles) relating to the proper execution of the grant agreement. They shall be carried out on a confidential basis.

The beneficiary SME shall keep all sub-project deliverables and the originals or, in exceptional cases, duly authenticated copies – including electronic copies – of all documents relating to the sub-project contract for up to 5 years from the end of the programme. These shall be made available to the EC whenever requested during any audit under the grant agreement.

7.5 Internal communication

Each of the teams selected to join the programme must nominate a primary contact point that will act as a coordinator during the duration of the programme.

- Provide any notice in writing to the EmpoWomen programme coordinator.

- Notify immediately of any change of persons or contact details to hello@empowomen.eu. The address list shall be accessible to all concerned.

7.6 External communication and open data

Each funded organisation will be publicly listed at EmpoWomen public channels like social networks or website. The funding disbursed by the EmpoWomen consortium to each of the beneficiaries will be made public under a dataset that will be uploaded into an open a free repository as it is Zenodo.