

UNIGEM (University and Gender Mainstreaming) project and research “The Challenges of Mainstreaming Gender Equality in University Communities. Fighting Gender-Based Violence”

Website: <http://www.tpo.ba>

Country: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Geographical focus: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro

Scientific field/Thematic focus: Cross-thematic/Interdisciplinary

What is the good practice about?

UNIGEM is a multilateral collaborative project implemented by TPO Foundation from Sarajevo together with 19 universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro in the period from 2021 to 2025. The main goal is to design gender-responsive and gender-sensitive policies, establish gender equality bodies, integrate gender equality themes in university curricula, and sensitize teachers, students, and administrative staff to gender equality and gender-based violence.

Why is this initiative needed?

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union (EU) and it includes equal treatment and non-discrimination in every area of life. In the EU strategy for gender equality (2020-2025) the key goal is the elimination of gender-based violence which represents one of the biggest challenges today in all socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts, regardless of the level of development and achievements. It is known that discrimination in the workplace is common in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but is rarely reported. In the report of the Helsinki Citizens' Parliament Banja Luka (Gačanica, 2019), 76.3% of respondents stated that they did not report sexual harassment, and 17% shared their experience that competent institutions generally did nothing more but listen to them.

After taking a look at the regional universities it could be established that the same phenomena regarding gender-based violence that are present in the wider society can also be witnessed in the academic community. Once the interview phase of the UNIGEM research started, testimonies of interlocutors confirmed that non-verbal, verbal, and even physical gender-based violence is present at the universities in the region. The following activities of the UNIGEM project have this problem as their focal point since there is an apparent need to introduce mechanisms of elimination of GBV in this community to ensure safety for teaching, administrative staff, and students of all genders.



What are the main objectives?

The main objective of this initiative is the strengthening of the capacities of state and private universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region and state educational institutions to combat gender-based violence and sexual harassment (GBVSH).

The UNIGEM project has been initiated in 2021. Since then, significant changes have been introduced at the partner universities. As one of the first steps, all 18 institutions of higher education have established forms of Advisory Boards for Gender Equality which coordinate activities related to this topic at their institutions.

The next big result of the UNIGEM initiative was the development and implementation of Gender Action Plans. The overall objectives of this document are to empower university teaching and scientific staff, as well as non-teaching staff, to promote gender equality in their work by developing training programs and education focused on the concept of gender, to integrate the principle of gender equality through work with students, and to improve scientific and artistic work and production by introducing gender equality principles.

Furthermore, all partner universities have joined the global campaign “16 days of activism for gender equality” where they have organized various workshops and similar events with the aim of raising awareness on gender-based violence in the academic community. In the upcoming period, the stakeholder institutions are developing plans to gender mainstream their curricula by introducing gender-based classes in their portfolio of subjects.

What are the main activities?

The main activities of the UNIGEM project are:

- ⇒ Establishing gender mainstreaming policy and mechanisms e.g. signing memorandums between state or private universities or any other institution, governmental or non-governmental that supports gender mainstreaming strategy or integration of gender politics, distribution of research, creation of related documents)
- ⇒ Strengthening academic exchange of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regional, and international experts (e.g. organization of conferences, call for papers, involvement in the research, organization of winter school)
- ⇒ Empowering and sensitizing university structures for GBVSH (e.g. various training for teaching staff)
- ⇒ GMS impact analysis (e.g. impact Analysis Study on project implementation success and challenges, final Conference on project implementation)

Who is involved?

In regard to the key actors involved, formally, the entire project is run directly by TPO Foundation, with the support of the University gender resources centre (UNIGeRC) of the University of Sarajevo that serves as a hub connecting all the focal points at partner universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region and helps them with further training and education.



This way of functioning is based on the fact that all partner universities (in the initial phase, there were 17 partners and now UNIGEM has 19 partners) signed the MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with the TPO Foundation, what secured project implementation, and as well, partners' commitment to the project cause. (Engagement of the university staff and other experts has been done via direct contracts).

Regarding the inclusion of beneficiaries and policy makers, ministries of education were informed about the project and both agencies (one at the state level and the other in Republika Srpska) for higher education were consulted and they confirmed they will assist in any way they can. Regarding immediate project partners (19 universities), they are unanimous to strengthen their capacities in terms of combating gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment (SH).

In order to achieve this, UNIGEM Project Plan envisioned work on establishing procedures and practices in higher education institutions to detect and tackle as well as prevent a widely set social taboo of sexual violence and harassment. More specifically, project outcomes are/will be:

- ⇒ Established gender mainstreaming policy and mechanisms
- ⇒ Strengthened academic exchange of Bosnia and Herzegovina, region and international experts
- ⇒ Empowered and sensitized University structures for GBVSH
- ⇒ GMS impact analysis

The above-mentioned outcomes target the issue of non-existence of gender mainstreaming strategies and mechanisms at universities and no relevant research to reveal how deeply gender inequality is embedded in the structure of higher education. Therefore, the intended change will be:

- Gender mainstreaming strategies at targeted universities designed,
- Focal points for GBVSH and gender resource centres established,
- Teachers and students empowered to combat unconscious bias,
- Modules on GBVSH in the curricula designed and integrated, and
- Campaigns organized and academic networks within Bosnia and Herzegovina and internationally established.

Key actors' contribution and/or participation, from the project start till now, has been achieved via:

- Signing memorandums of understanding (between TPO and partner universities), what was an extraordinary success in Bosnia and Herzegovina given its complex administrative and legal structures, (but also it was a big step for partners from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro)
- Production of institutional gender action plans (GAPs)
- Establishment of focal points at universities
- Additional training for teachers and students
- Development of new courses and other materials on gender (to be integrated in the curricula)
- Creating possibilities for interuniversity cooperation on the national and regional level as well as for networking with regional and European universities that already finished the gender mainstreaming process and can be an example of good practices
- Awareness-raising campaigns against GBVSH, meant for all stakeholders (teachers, students and decision-makers)

Can this good practice be replicated?

The UNIGEM project is designed to particularly offer solutions to the needs of the Balkan region with its specific socio-cultural context. The partner universities included in the project are from four regional countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. One of the currently biggest outcomes of the project is the first regional research on gender-based violence in the academic community, the publication “*Challenges of mainstreaming gender equality in the university communities: Fighting gender-based violence*” is currently available in all four regional languages. The UNIGEM project initiative can be easily transferred and applied to different regions as it serves as an excellent example of how changes can be implemented even in a more traditional communities that are not keen on implementing changes.

Further links:

- ⇒ <http://www.tpo.ba/b/novosti1EN.html>
- ⇒ <https://unigerc.unsa.ba/>
- ⇒ <http://www.tpo.ba/b/dokument/lzazovi%20integriranja%20rodne%20ravnopravnosti%20-%20bosanska%20verzija.pdf>
- ⇒ [http://www.tpo.ba/b/dokument/\(TPO%20web\)%20The%20Challenges%20of%20Mainstreaming%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20University%20Communities%202022.pdf](http://www.tpo.ba/b/dokument/(TPO%20web)%20The%20Challenges%20of%20Mainstreaming%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20University%20Communities%202022.pdf)
- ⇒ Twitter: <https://twitter.com/tpofoundation>
- ⇒ Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TPOFoundation/>
- ⇒ Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/tpofondacija/?hl=hr>
- ⇒ YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@univerzitetskigenderresurs4658>
<https://www.youtube.com/@tpofoundation2401>

Relevant RRI keys: Gender Equality in Research and Innovation (R&I)

Type of practice: Dedicated plan, strategy document (e.g. Gender Equality Plan, Open Access Strategy, etc.), Promotional activities/events/campaigns, Publications/promotional material, Lobbying/advocacy/representation, Strategic & action planning, Participation in public policy/researches/studies, Organisation of info days, workshop, seminars, etc., Organisation of training, webinars, Organisation of conferences, panels, round-tables, Establishment of new decision-making structures or boards (e.g., related to ethics, discrimination, etc.)

Target groups: universities, research performing organisations

