CZU: 338.48-6:502/504 **https://doi.org/10.59295/mpdnwe2024.50**

GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM THE WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION (UN Tourism) INITIATIVES

SIV Olivia
UN Tourism Technical Cooperation and Silk Road, Madrid, Spain
osiv@unwto.org

Purpose of the article: This paper takes a close look at the successfully completed project "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism", implemented by UN Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture of Moldova, Invest Moldova Agency, and Moldova State University, with funding from the Estonian Development Cooperation.

The project takes a new approach to achieving the SDGS and its objectives are to raise awareness on the role and opportunities of sustainable tourism to promote gender equality, both among young women and public and private tourism sector stakeholders; and to increase the number of young female entrepreneurs with improved skills for the tourism sector.

In its first stage, a rapid tourism training needs assessment was carried out through interviews, focus groups and surveys with a wide range of stakeholders' groups. Based on this assessment, a multi-component training programme was devised and delivered during the second phase.

The tourism skills training delivered to 256 female entrepreneurs across 11 rural villages has proven to be a valuable tool for women in the Republic of Moldova, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully develop and manage businesses in this sector.

The 2-day training-of-trainers course provided to 5 female gender equality experts created the desired ripple effect. This strategy aims to cultivate a self-sustaining cycle of mentorship and growth among female trainers in the country, paving the way for enduring professional development.

The online gender equality training delivered to more than 60 tourism stakeholders had a substantive impact as it provided an important opportunity to gain valuable knowledge about the challenges and opportunities related to gender equality in tourism; and being part of the solution in creating a more equal and inclusive tourism industry, and economic empowerment for women in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: SDGs, sustainable tourism, gender equality, women empowerment, inclusive tourism, Estonian Development Cooperation, UN Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Invest Moldova, MSU.

Introduction

The tourism industry, a dynamic and globally significant sector, presents both opportunities and challenges for women. Despite their significant contribution, comprising 54% of the tourism workforce, women often find themselves in low-paid and low-status roles. These positions, while critical to the industry's operations, lack recognition and growth opportunities. Furthermore, women frequently undertake unpaid labor in family-run tourism businesses, further entrenching gender inequalities.

This scenario underscores the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality in tourism. Empowering women through skills development, access to leadership opportunities, and financial independence can unlock their full potential. By addressing structural barriers and fostering inclusive policies, the tourism industry can not only become more equitable but also thrive as a sustainable and innovative sector.

Women's empowerment in tourism goes beyond social justice—it enhances the quality of services, drives economic growth, and preserves cultural heritage. Bridging the gender gap in tourism ensures that women are not just participants but leaders and innovators, shaping a more inclusive and resilient future for the industry.

The "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism in the Republic of Moldova" initiative represents a significant step toward reducing vulnerability among young women by integrating them into the fast-growing, labor-intensive tourism sector. This program not only creates

opportunities for economic growth but also aligns with global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:

SDG 4: Quality Education – By equipping young women with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in the tourism industry, the program ensures access to educational and vocational growth.

SDG 5: Gender Equality – The initiative addresses systemic gender inequalities by empowering women to take leadership roles and contribute meaningfully to the economy.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – Tourism, as a rapidly expanding sector, provides a platform for creating dignified employment opportunities that foster economic resilience.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities – By focusing on vulnerable demographics, particularly rural women, the program helps bridge economic and social gaps.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions – Through collaboration with institutions, the initiative promotes a just and inclusive industry that supports long-term stability.

By focusing on sustainable tourism as a tool for empowerment, this initiative not only strengthens local communities but also leverages Moldova's cultural and natural assets. It fosters an environment where young women can thrive as entrepreneurs, leaders, and contributors to a vibrant and inclusive tourism industry, ultimately driving social and economic transformation.

Results and discussions

The "Rapid Tourism Training Needs Assessment" marks the foundational phase of a broader initiative to enhance tourism capabilities and empower stakeholders in Moldova. Conducted through interviews, focus groups, and surveys, this comprehensive assessment identified the unique training requirements of the tourism sector by engaging a diverse range of organizations and industry leaders.

Key Stakeholders:

Entrepreneurial Networks: Groups such as the Association of Women Entrepreneurs and the Organization for Small & Medium Enterprises Development contributed insights on fostering innovation and supporting women-led tourism initiatives.

Tourism Associations: Organizations like the National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association (ANTRIM) and the National Association of Rural, Ecological, and Cultural Tourism provided sector-specific expertise on enhancing competitiveness and sustainability.

Professional Bodies: Contributions from the Employers' Association of the Tourism Industry (APIT) and the National Association of Guides Moldova ensured practical perspectives on skill development and workforce training.

Cross-Sector Collaborations: Initiatives such as the Office for External Assistance Programs and Travel Forever brought regional and global expertise to support young women in tourism entrepreneurship.

This phase emphasized a participatory approach, ensuring that the program design aligns with the real needs of stakeholders. The findings will shape targeted training modules to address skill gaps, promote sustainable tourism practices, and foster inclusive growth. By leveraging the expertise and collaboration of these diverse groups, the project lays a strong foundation for empowering individuals and strengthening Moldova's tourism sector.

The Phase II of the initiative focuses on the development and delivery of a multi-component training program, aiming to strengthen the tourism sector in Moldova through education, skill development, and empowerment. This phase showcases Moldova State University (MSU) as the key local implementing partner, bringing academic expertise and community engagement to the forefront.

Core Components:

10 Tourism Skills Training Seminars: These practical seminars are designed to equip participants with vital skills for operating and excelling in the tourism sector, ensuring they are prepared to meet the demands of a dynamic and growing industry.

2-Day Training of Trainers Program: This program ensures sustainability by building a network of well-prepared trainers who can continue to disseminate knowledge and best practices within the sector.

4 Online Courses on Gender Equality in Tourism: With a focus on inclusivity, these courses address critical issues of gender equality, empowering participants to foster an equitable and balanced tourism industry.

Local Implementation and Impact:

As a trusted academic institution, Moldova State University plays a pivotal role in the implementation of this program. Its involvement ensures that the training modules are tailored to the unique needs of the local context while adhering to global best practices. This collaboration reflects a commitment to capacity-building, promoting both professional development and social change.

The multi-component approach not only enhances individual capabilities but also strengthens the tourism ecosystem, fostering resilience, inclusivity, and economic growth. This phase is a critical step towards transforming Moldova's tourism industry into a model of sustainability and gender equality.

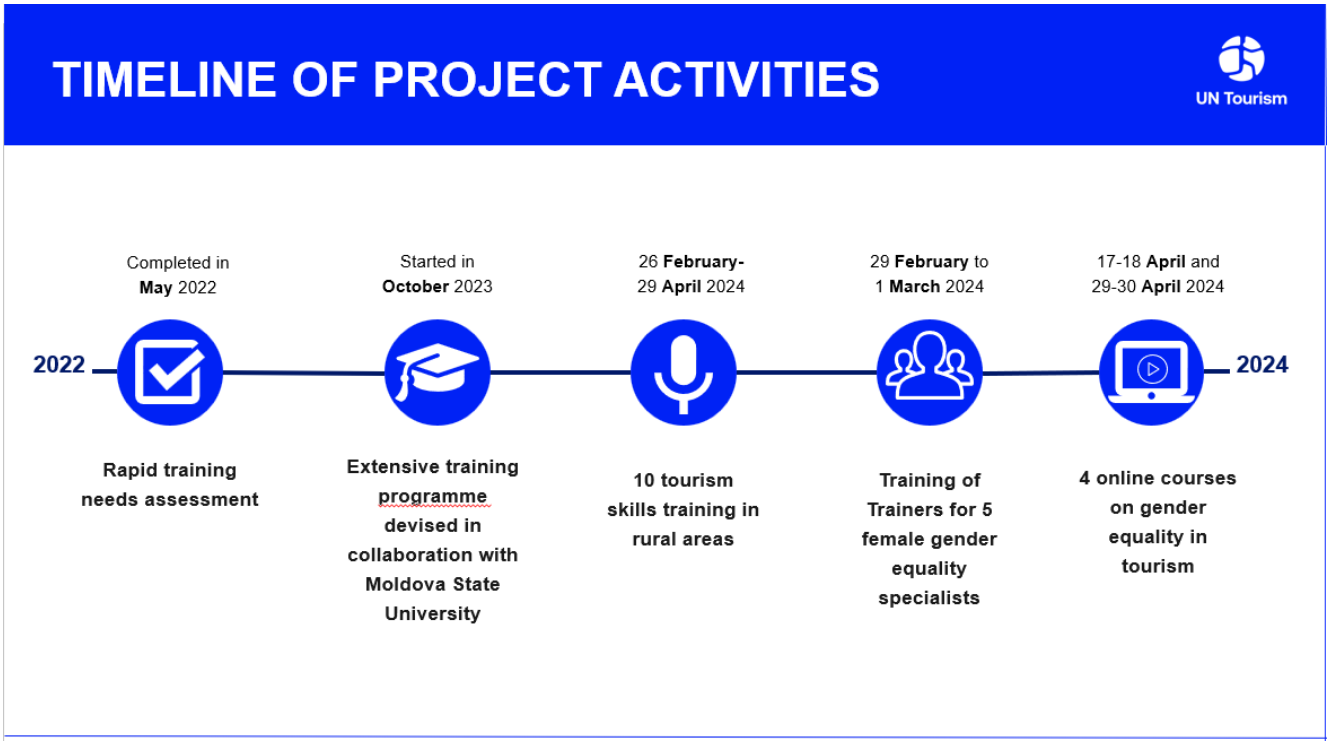


Figure 1. Timeline of project activities

In alignment with the Ministry of Culture's recommendation, Moldova State University (MSU) has proudly joined a landmark Cooperation Agreement with the UN Tourism (World Tourism Organization), the Ministry of Culture, and Invest Moldova Agency. This collaboration is pivotal to the implementation of the "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods Through Tourism" project, a transformative initiative aimed at fostering gender equality and building sustainable livelihoods for young women in Moldova through tourism.

Since the project's Kick-off Meeting on September 29, 2023, MSU has been actively fulfilling its commitments under the agreement signed on October 16, 2023. The university's efforts have focused on capacity building, inclusivity, and empowering women through skills training. Key activities undertaken include:

Participation in Strategic Planning and Online Coordination

MSU actively participated in three online meetings organized by the UN Tourism work team, contributing to planning and refining the project's framework.

Identifying and Engaging Expert Trainers

Recognizing the importance of expertise in promoting gender equality, MSU collaborated with international experts to identify and select trainers for the Gender Equality Training Program. Following

consultations and rigorous evaluation, six expert trainers—Eugenia Iurco, Cristina Jardan, Natalia Iachimov, Nelea Rusu, Natalia Turcanu, and Diana Lazar—were approved. While Nelea Rusu was unable to attend the Training of Trainers (ToT) seminar, the remaining trainers excelled and prepared for the April training sessions.

Organizing and Hosting the Training of Trainers (ToT) Seminar

From February 26 to March 1, 2024, MSU coordinated a critical UN Tourism mission. This mission included meetings with MSU leadership, pilot group training, and the ToT seminar on both skills training and Gender Equality in Tourism. The sessions, conducted in English by UNTourism experts, prepared approximately 15 trainers to deliver the project's core training programs.

Delivering Skills Training for Women Across Moldova

A central focus of the project is empowering approximately 200 women through 10 targeted skills training seminars, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to thrive in sustainable tourism. The curriculum covers practical and relevant topics to ensure participants gain meaningful and applicable skills.

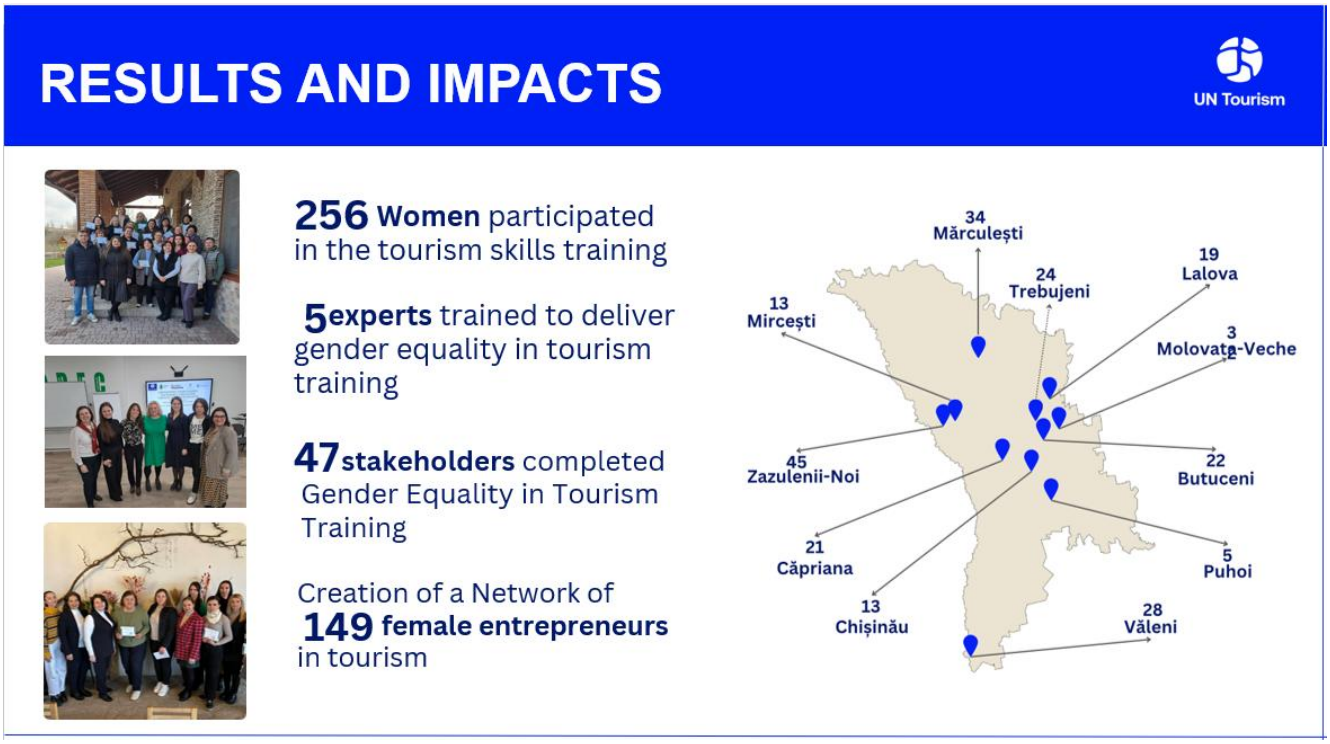


Figure 2. Results and impact of the "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism" project.

The "Final Report on Tourism Skills Training" highlights a transformative initiative aimed at empowering rural women in Moldova through sustainable tourism. This comprehensive program, under the banner of the project "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism", was designed to equip approximately 200 women with practical skills and knowledge essential for succeeding in the tourism sector.

Key Outcomes:

- The program addressed critical areas such as tourist safety, hygiene standards, customer service, tour guiding, digital literacy, and financial management of tourism businesses. Delivered through interactive and participatory methods, the training combined theoretical knowledge with hands-on practical applications.
- Over 250 participants, including returnees and aspiring entrepreneurs, gained confidence, motivation, and a strong foundation to initiate and manage tourism-related ventures. The program fostered entrepreneurial spirit and innovation, especially among women seeking to preserve cultural heritage and promote unique rural experiences.

- The initiative catalyzed local economic growth by creating job opportunities, supporting rural businesses, and enhancing the quality of life. Networking and mentorship components added significant value, enabling participants to exchange ideas and access industry resources.
- By emphasizing gender equality and sustainable tourism practices, the project contributed to the socio-economic upliftment of rural Moldova, ensuring long-term benefits for communities and participants alike.

The project's success lies in its ability to adapt training methods to participants' specific needs, foster collaboration, and inspire entrepreneurial leadership. The positive feedback underscores its impact, making it a model for future capacity-building efforts in rural tourism.

As part of the project "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism", the Gender Equality Training program brought together key stakeholders to address critical issues and opportunities related to gender dynamics in tourism.

Key Highlights:

- Delivered over four sessions to 53 participants, the training focused on gender dimensions, challenges, good practices, and actionable strategies to promote equality in tourism. The program combined theoretical insights with interactive and participatory learning approaches.
- The sessions emphasized understanding the importance of gender equality in tourism, reviewing challenges and best practices globally and in Moldova, and equipping participants with actionable steps to create equitable opportunities in the sector.
- Participants included policymakers, decision-makers, and specialists from the tourism and gender equality domains. This diversity enriched the discussions and broadened perspectives on the systemic changes needed.
- Feedback highlighted the program's effectiveness in shifting perceptions and providing practical tools for implementing inclusive practices. Participants expressed a strong desire to contribute to a more equitable and prosperous tourism industry.
- Positive feedback from evaluations underscored the training's relevance and effectiveness. Suggestions for longer, more interactive sessions with technology integration reflect the program's ability to inspire and engage participants.

The training successfully addressed key knowledge gaps while inspiring actionable change. By equipping participants with strategies and tools to advance gender equality, the initiative contributes significantly to the sustainable development of Moldova's tourism sector. With its innovative and inclusive approach, the program serves as a model for empowering communities through targeted capacity-building efforts.

Conclusions:

The "Empowering Young Women: Sustainable Livelihoods through Tourism" project has proven to be a transformative initiative, equipping rural women in Moldova with essential skills and confidence to thrive in the tourism industry. Through targeted Tourism Skills Training Courses and Gender Equality Training Seminars, women have gained practical knowledge, forged valuable networks, and strengthened their entrepreneurial capabilities, all while contributing to the sustainable development of their communities.

This initiative underscores Moldova's commitment to fostering gender equality, leveraging tourism as a driver for economic empowerment, and positioning young women as active contributors to sustainable development. Through its dedication to these objectives, MSU is not only fulfilling its role in the project but also championing a brighter, more inclusive future for young women in Moldova.

The project concluded with a Final Workshop on June 24, 2024, bringing together all experts and stakeholders. This online event celebrated the outcomes, shared lessons learned, and explored pathways for ensuring the project's long-term sustainability. The discussions underscored the importance of

continuing to empower women in Moldova's tourism industry by expanding training opportunities and fostering inclusive, action-driven initiatives.

This initiative has laid a strong foundation for empowering rural women, demonstrating the transformative potential of education and support. By addressing both practical business needs and systemic gender barriers, the project has not only improved the lives of its participants but also highlighted the critical role of women in shaping a more inclusive and sustainable tourism industry in Moldova. Future efforts will build on this momentum, ensuring that even more women are equipped to lead and innovate in this dynamic sector.

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