

# Bielsko-Biała: Bringing HerStory to Male-Dominated Tech



 Bielsko Biała, Poland

Tech ecosystem

Local development

## Introduction

Bielsko-Biała is located in southern Poland in the Silesia Voivodeship and building its reputation as a regional tech hub notably through HerStory in IT initiative. The initiative emerged from the [TechDiversity](#) Action Planning network, funded under URBACT IV, and is led by the Regional Development Agency (RDA) in partnership with the newly established IT in the Mountains Association, founded in November 2024. It brings together a diverse coalition of stakeholders including the RDA serving as project coordinator, city administration with strong support from the mayor, local IT companies representing 15 association members, the academic sector through four cooperation agreements with universities, and various business support organisations. All these actors participate through the URBACT Local Group framework, targeting women seeking to enter or advance in the IT sector while engaging the broader tech ecosystem to promote gender diversity and inclusion.

## [Problem Statement]

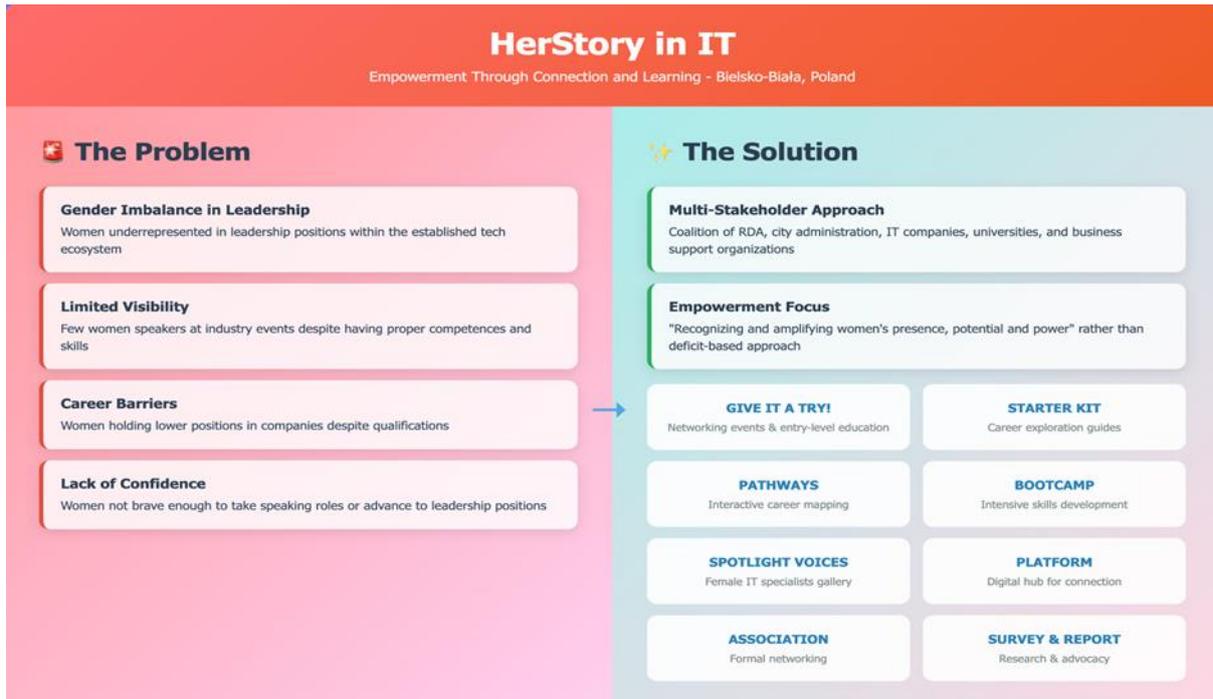
The tech ecosystem, while well-established and connected, exhibited classic gender imbalances with women underrepresented in leadership positions and speaking roles at industry events. *"Due to the technological scope of my projects - events, conferences, meetings, were usually dominated by men. And this was not because there weren't any women in the organisations, but they either weren't enough brave to be a speaker for example, or even though had proper competences and skills, held lower positions in the companies etc. classical issues."* (Patrycja Węgrzyn, the project coordinator). This personal experience of navigating male-dominated professional environments provided authentic motivation for developing an initiative that could address these systemic barriers.

## [Implementation and Actions]

HerStory in IT represents a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to addressing gender inequality in the local tech sector through eight interconnected actions spanning entry-level support to leadership development. The initiative includes the "GIVE IT A TRY!" portfolio of networking events and entry-level education schemes, complemented by downloadable "STARTER KIT" guides for career exploration and "PATHWAYS" interactive career mapping tools that provide personalised guidance for women exploring IT opportunities.

Skills development occurs through "BOOTCAMP" programs in high-demand areas such as coding, data analysis, and cybersecurity. Visibility and community building initiatives centre on "SPOTLIGHT VOICES," a gallery showcasing stories of local female IT specialists and leaders, integrated through a comprehensive digital "PLATFORM" that serves as a one-stop hub for inspiration, education, and connection. The initiative also establishes a formal "ASSOCIATION" for ongoing networking and professional development.

Research and advocacy components include a comprehensive "SURVEY & REPORT" analysing women's current position in the local IT sector, and "TechDiversity PROMOTION" efforts focused on city-level advocacy for diversity and inclusion policies. This holistic approach addresses multiple career stages and barriers simultaneously.



The funding structure relies primarily on the [TechDiversity/URBACT IV project budget](#), supplemented by support from the IT in the Mountains Association. Operating costs remain modest, with events averaging approximately €1,000 each for venue and catering, while maintaining a volunteer-based participation model that ensures broad engagement with less expenses. The implementation strategy leveraged existing relationships within the well-connected local tech ecosystem, building particularly on the successful [BBDays4.IT festival](#). This 10-day annual event series includes meetups, hackathons, business conferences, and outdoor activities, and had already fostered informal discussions about diversity and inclusion before the formal initiative launched. The URBACT framework provided necessary structure and funding to formalise these conversations into concrete, measurable actions. The initiative benefits from strong political support, with the Mayor demonstrating awareness and positive attitude toward the program's objectives.

### [Lessons Learned]

The initiative has demonstrated several key success factors during its pilot phase. Multi-stakeholder engagement proved essential, with the broad coalition ensuring a comprehensive approach that addresses various aspects of gender inequality in tech. Maintaining regularity in programming helped sustain momentum and participant engagement, while integration with existing formats, provided established audiences and reduced start-up barriers.

Perhaps most importantly, the initiative's positive framing approach has proven effective. As Patrycja emphasized: "*HerStory in IT is not about 'helping women' as if they lacked something — it's about recognising and amplifying their presence, potential and power.*" This empowerment-focused messaging resonates more effectively than traditional deficit-based approaches to gender equality programming.

Key challenges include maintaining long-term momentum beyond initial project funding and securing sustainable financing for continued operations. The volunteer-based model, while cost-effective, requires ongoing commitment from busy professionals who must balance initiative participation with their primary responsibilities.

The most significant lesson learned focuses on private sector engagement. As the project coordinator noted: "*High involvement of private sector in this kind of projects and initiatives ensures high*

*effectiveness and real-world impact, by aligning support with actual needs.*" This demonstrates the critical importance of business community engagement in developing effective gender equality initiatives that address real workplace challenges rather than theoretical concerns.

The initiative tracks participant numbers across all program components, participant feedback and motivation levels, and long-term stakeholder engagement rates as primary success indicators. Planned impact measurement includes comprehensive survey data on women's representation in the local IT sector and career advancement tracking for program participants.

### [ Key Takeaways ]

The HerStory in IT model demonstrates strong potential for replication in other medium-sized cities with developing tech ecosystems. The replicable framework includes multi-stakeholder coalition building approaches, integration strategies with existing industry events and networks, and comprehensive action portfolios addressing multiple career stages simultaneously. Critical adaptation considerations include assessing local ecosystem maturity and existing gender dynamics, identifying available funding mechanisms and their duration constraints, aligning with regional policy priorities and smart specialisation areas, and developing culturally appropriate communication strategies. The Bielsko-Biala experience demonstrates that effective gender equality initiatives in tech can emerge organically from existing networks when provided with appropriate structure, funding, and political support, making it a valuable model for similar cities across Europe seeking to address gender imbalances in their emerging technology sectors.