

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS IN ALBANIA

A POSITION PAPER BY THE UNITED NATIONS IN ALBANIA

In the past years Albania has made important progress on gender equality, especially by developing a comprehensive set of laws to promote, enforce, and monitor non-discrimination on the basis of sex and gender identity. The country is expected to implement additional reforms in various sectors in line with EU gender equality standards. While national institutions have made strides to put women and girls at the forefront of national priorities, the country needs to strengthen implementation of laws and policies, accountability, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the achievement of all gender related targets in the Sustainable Development Goals, and to make sure that the health pandemic response specifically addresses the impact that COVID 19 is having on women and men, boys and girls.

This document reflects UN Albania's contribution for the identification of key policy areas and strategies to accelerate gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the country. It is also intended as an input for promoting a gender-responsive agenda in the political parties ahead of the next term of the newly elected National Assembly¹.

1) PUTTING WOMEN AND GIRLS AT THE CENTRE OF ALBANIAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EU INTEGRATION

The new National Strategy for Sustainable Development and Integration, as well as the new National Strategy for Gender Equality and other sectorial strategies currently under review provide a unique opportunity to identify key actions to promote full gender equality. Putting women and girls at the centre of sustainable development and EU integration efforts should draw on four strategic axes, including higher investments to close gaps in the implementation of existing commitments, strong gender statistics, empowered mechanisms to coordinate action and monitor results, as well as unleashing women leadership, equal representation and participation in decision making at all levels.

- I. **Increased financing of gender equality** interventions is central to achieve sustainable development results. Though Albania has made much progress in implementing gender-responsive planning and budgeting, more needs to be done to ensure that allocation and use of public resources directly address persisting gender gaps and child rights concerns, that national strategies and programs are costed, and that there is sufficient capacity and mechanisms in place to monitor the actual use of resources.

¹ This paper draws on national available data and is drafted based on the Universal Peer Review that Albania undertook at the UN Human Rights Council in 2019, on recent observations from the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other UN treaty bodies, as well as on the Gender Action Plan III of the European Union.

- II. Existing gaps in **gender statistics** must be addressed to properly measure the achievement of gender equality results, and to objectively assess the impact of policies and investments. Across sectors, lack of disaggregated data by sex, age, urban-rural, social economic and legal status, constitutes a challenge that needs to be tackled by ensuring that reliable data are produced and made available.
- III. **Effective leadership and coordination of actors** at central and local level are essential to ensure that gender gaps are consistently addressed across areas of government action. Law 9970/2008 on Gender Equality established a dedicated mechanism including the National Council on Gender Equality, a Gender Equality Unit in the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, as well as a network of gender focal points in ministries and institutions. However, the overall set up has various limitations in terms of political empowerment and clarity of roles and responsibilities, insufficient funding, weak capacities, and lack of systematic inter institutional collaboration, both among central level actors and with local government units. Against this backdrop, ensuring effective coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes becomes very challenging.
- IV. **Expanding women's and girls' leadership is key.** Undeniably, there has been significant progress in the participation and representation of women in leadership roles. Thanks to gender quotas, women seats in the National Parliament and local councils increased to 26.2% and 35.9% respectively, with further progress expected following the recent national elections. With 45.5% of women in ministerial positions, Albania stands among the top 10 countries in the world; 48.1% of the Central Bank board members are women, compared to an EU average of 20.3%. To sustain such gains, additional space for meaningful women leadership in politics and the economy is needed, promoting their role as change agents and contributors - on an equal footing with men and boys - to choices that will affect the country's development path for the years to come. Global evidence suggests that when more women are in positions of power and women and girls' voice is heard, more civilized and collaborative forms of political dialogue are observed, with greater respect for diversity and opponents and more systematic search for common ground on issues that affect people lives beyond political divides. The recent parliamentary election provided an opportunity to restore an inclusive political climate that respects women's and child rights and family life of candidates and supporters, mindful of the different needs and interests of men and women, boys and girls, giving a voice to those who have none and promoting participation of both voting and non-voting constituencies. However, preliminary analysis of the pre and post-election media coverage suggests that female candidates and voters continued to face some challenges in fully participating in the campaign, with cases observed of harassment and negative labelling based on gender and physical appearance.

2) ELIMINATING ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, HARMFUL PRACTICES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Violence against women and girls remains one of the most pressing issues in Albanian society, requiring priority attention and action. Deeply rooted patriarchy perpetuates and justifies violence, abuse and discrimination, creating major obstacles to achieving real equality between men and women, boys and girls. Available data shows that at least one in two women have experienced some form of violence, including domestic or sexual violence, harassment, non-partner violence, child and/or forced marriage, and stalking. 26% of women aged 18-74 believe a woman should be ashamed to talk to anyone if she is raped, while 21% think that if a woman is raped, she probably did something to put herself in trouble. 60% of sexual

crimes are committed against children, with nearly one in two suffering from physical or psychological aggression. Evidence also reveals a strong correlation between child sexual abuse and gender-based violence in adulthood. Coordinated Referral Mechanisms (CRMs) and Child Protection Groups in municipalities are not fully functional, with support services understaffed and under resourced, and not tailored to address all forms of gender-based violence and all groups of persons in need. The legal definition of rape in the Criminal Code remains a force-based definition, with the burden of proof falling on the victim. There are gaps in legislation addressing online safety, and no provisions for protecting victims of crimes other than domestic violence (e.g. stalking, harassment or sexual assault), hence CRMs are not legally required to manage such cases. 68.8% of women (compared to 31.2% of men) feel that the justice system does not protect them and is not child friendly. Cultural resistance within responsible authorities, persisting discrimination and poverty lead to limited or no access to justice by victims of gender-based violence belonging to various groups, including Roma and Egyptian, migrants and refugees, LGBTQI, the disabled and the elderly, as well as children victims of crime or in conflict with the law. With the outbreak of COVID 19, gender-based violence has become more and more a 'shadow pandemic' that needs to be addressed by policy makers in its entirety and complexity, including by prioritizing three strategic approaches.

- I. **Securing leadership and accountability:** State actors, including the Parliament, the Government, National Human Rights Institutions and the Judiciary must prioritize violence against children and gender-based violence; authorities that are responsible to promote gender equality and child rights must be sufficiently empowered and resourced to lead the response and coordinate action. Political leadership is key, including through the National Councils on Gender Equality and on Child Rights and Protection. National institutions should drive action, monitor progress and adjust course, learning from success and failure. This includes better coordination with local actors: mayors and local councils, the police and the courts, coordinated referral mechanisms, school personnel, local NGOs and social workers. They all are at the front line of action and must be able to fulfill their responsibilities.
- II. **Increasing investments:** greater resources are needed to secure full application of existing laws. While the country made significant progress in aligning its legal framework to international normative standards, additional amendments are required to effectively fight against sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking, whether on and off-line. The full menu of services should be readily accessible to all those in need. This includes strengthening a victim-centered approach and increasing protection of survivors through legal aid and timely enforcement of protection orders. Health and psychological counselling, social protection, housing and income opportunities should be made available. Functioning emergency shelters should be available to women and girls of all nationalities, ages, and cultural backgrounds, including asylum-seekers and refugees. National helplines and referral pathways must become sustainable, with clear goals, adequate funding and staffing. Civil society efforts need support, including those to address the intersecting dimensions of gender-based violence (e.g. based on ethnicity, age, disability, place of residence, etc.). Poor implementation contributes to low levels of trust in the system, leading victims to remain in the shadows.
- III. **Prioritizing education, dialogue and public awareness.** Albanian men and boys continue to uphold stereotyped gender roles, often linked to a vicious cycle of aggressiveness. In parallel to helping boys realize that 'true men' are feminists, helping girls become fully aware of their worth is crucial to fight harmful stereotypes that prevent them from realizing their full potential. A whole-of-society engagement is needed, with schools equipped to lead the way in promoting human rights and fighting patriarchal values, mobilizing students, parents, care givers and community members in conversations around child protection, equality and non-discrimination, cultural and racial

diversity, sexuality education, masculinity, girls empowerment and self-defense, and safe internet use. Public information also plays a massive role in eradicating the culture of gender stereotyping, violence and abuse. The media must be part of the solution, reporting on the implementation of laws and policies, supporting survivors instead of justifying perpetrators, and giving voice to youth who challenge the status quo. In addition, protecting the privacy of survivors should be prioritized: publishing information with personal details of victims (especially minors) should not be tolerated.

3) STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND WOMEN AND GIRLS' ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Wide gender gaps in economic opportunities persist, including low labour force participation, high levels of informality, and low access to productive inputs. While the overall activity rate of the population aged 15 – 64 steadily increased over the years, women's labour force participation continues to be lower (61.6%) than men's (77.6%). Occupational stereotypes limit women's and girls' choices, as they work predominantly in health and social services, education, manufacturing, and agriculture, all sectors characterised by lower wages. Agriculture remains the primary employer for women (41.6% compared to 32.3% men). In addition, unmet childcare needs lead to women's inactivity. Women do 96% of domestic chores and are out of work primarily due to unpaid care work at home – 18% of women to 1% of men. Similarly, girls perform almost four times more unpaid care work than boys. The gender pay gap for the formal sector is 10.1% in favour of men. While lower than the average EU countries, Albania's gender pay gap is also the result of women's lower participation in the labour market, and it is higher in sectors where women are concentrated. The concentration of women and girls in the informal economy and in few sectors also acts as a break on the overall economic growth of the country, when there is growing consensus that Albania needs to increase productivity and diversify employment and education opportunities (e.g. towards science, ITC, and entrepreneurship). Women participation in business increased during the last decade, with 25.4% of women owning or managing a business. However, the majority of women's enterprises are under-capitalised micro/small businesses in mostly informal and lower value-added sectors (e.g. in manufacturing and agriculture). Women's active participation in private sector development remains low, especially for women in rural areas, and the impact of discriminatory gender norms and behaviours is found at all levels. The gender gap in access to credit has not decreased over the years. In addition, while women formally enjoy equal rights to inheritance and ownership of land and property, over 80% of land titles remain in the name of the "head of household" (mainly husbands, fathers-in-law, brothers, fathers, grandfathers), thus limiting women's entitlements to productive resources such as registering a business, credit, and extension services, as well as their options to leave violent relationship. To strengthen economic justice and the empowerment of women and girls, the following actions should be prioritized.

- I. Promote decent work, equal pay and labour rights, and women's transition to the formal economy, by reducing labour market segregation, boosting women's leadership and increasing their bargaining power in the household on economic choices. Increasing investments for quality care services, law and policy reforms and the creation of decent care jobs to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, reward unpaid care work, and guarantee care workers' rights and representation.
- II. Fostering women entrepreneurship and women-led businesses, including social entrepreneurship, and their access to finance by providing innovative investments schemes, addressing the market's failure to promote the creation of women led SMEs. Additional targeted action should include business development services and support for employment, including for women and girls in recovery and in the green economy. Creating an enabling environment for women's economic activities and access to productive resources, including women's access to land, remittances, technology, and finance.

- III. Challenging gender norms within the household and the labour market, recognising men and boys' family roles and responsibilities, fostering legal reforms such as the introduction of paid paternity leave.

4) INVESTING IN WOMEN HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Albania spends roughly 3% of GDP on **health** and on **education** compared to the average 9.9% of GDP spent by EU countries. No comprehensive study is available on universal healthcare coverage and equitable access to healthcare. Direct payments are high, constituting a particular challenge for women living in rural and remote areas, and Roma and Egyptian women, who have limited access to primary health care and to sexual and reproductive health care. There is an urgent need to design and tailor appropriate services for adolescents, whose access to reproductive health care services remains inadequate, particularly considering the impact of unwanted pregnancies on girls (with adolescent birth rates well above the EU average: 14.2 per 1000 vs 9.2). LGBTQI individuals struggle to access medical services due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Recent studies suggest that sex-selective abortion is still practiced. The exact number of intersex born babies remains unclear, and information about surgeries performed on them is unavailable.

Targeted policies and investments are needed to ensure women enjoy the right to health without any discrimination. This should include I) Improving access to health services and prevention in public health, particularly on access to care for women belonging to minorities and young women, as well as on HIV prevention and the development of sexual education; II) Taking effective measures to eliminate discrimination of LGBTI persons, ensure non-discriminatory access of LGBTI persons to health services and introduce LGBTI education to school curriculum.

Current **educational outcomes** significantly contribute to gender disparities in the labour market and the gender wage gap. With girls outperforming boys in secondary education, gendered patterns and segregation are present in higher education. In vocational education, the vast majority (roughly 82%) are boys, largely due to the "male professions" stereotype, the social climate in vocational schools, the type of curricula offered, and girls' employment perspectives upon graduation. In tertiary education, on the other hand, 60% of students are girls compared to 40% of boys. Girls mostly pursue studies in education, health and wellbeing, and human sciences, while boys dominate the field of services, engineering, manufacturing and construction, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary. Though more women graduate from university compared to men, they do not enter the labour force in the same numbers and are not in line with their educational qualification. Schools and Universities can also be much more active in eliminating deeply rooted patriarchal values and gender stereotypes that continues to leave women and girls behind, and in reviewing enrolment requirements to allow more refugee girls and boys into the education system.

To address these challenges, concerted actions is needed in the following areas: I) Prioritize affordable and inclusive education, building stronger gender-responsive education systems to promote gender equality, non-discrimination and inclusiveness and deliver more equitable education results for girls and boys through safe and healthy learning environments, including in relation to teacher recruitment, training and professional development, curricula and learning materials development, engaging parents and communities. This would include ensuring compulsory full-time education for all girls and boys of minority groups, persons with disabilities and those living in rural areas. II) Increase investment in girls' education to achieve equal access to all forms of education and training, with greater focus on science, technology, engineering and maths, digital literacy and skills, and technical and vocational education and training. III) Use schools at all levels as a strategic entry points to combat gender stereotypes, discriminatory social norms and attitudes that still leave women and girls behind, with focus on gender-based violence as well as the physical/mental safety of both boys and girls.