

Madame Chair,

Members of the Committee,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of Albania, I would like to thank you for your work which has helped us improve the political, social and economic status of Albanian women and girls, and to promote gender equality in Albania.

The international conventions on human rights, and in particular the CEDAW Convention, its General Recommendations, and the Istanbul Convention, ratified by Albania in 2012, constitute the main roadmap in harmonizing our national legislation and in drafting policies and programs on gender quality, and against gender-based and domestic violence.

Albania, elected as a member of the Human Rights Council for 2015-2017, is committed to fulfilling its obligations in the area of human rights, focusing primarily on promoting and protecting women's rights.

The fourth report submitted by Albania in November 2014 and the complementary updated information on the list of issues aims at describing the situation of gender equality in the country, the progress made, and the difficulties and challenges in eliminating discrimination against women in every area, taking into account the Concluding Observations given by the Committee in September 2010.

The Inter-Institutional Group with representatives from central and independent institutions, established by an Order of the Prime Minister, drafted the Forth Report of the Government of Albania under the coordination of the Ministry for Social Welfare and Youth and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focusing on the legal developments, strengthening of the institutions, the drafting and implementation of policies, awareness raising campaigns, specific measures, and achievements and challenges according to the articles covered by the Convention. Consultations for improving the draft report with representatives of the state institutions, local government, civil society (human rights, women, and minority organizations), Assembly, and international organizations, etc., provided complementary information and improved its quality. We would like to thank the UN agencies, who supported the process by providing financial and human resources.

Madame Chair,

I-During the reporting period, **a series of measures are taken to improve the legal framework, such as:**

- 1- The amendments to the Criminal Code in 2012 and 2013 came not only as a need to criminally punish domestic violence and follow the recommendations given by the Committee in 2010, but also thanks to the joint objective of all actors for zero tolerance to domestic violence. In addition, the introduction of harsher sanctions against perpetrators, the introduction of marital rape as a criminal offence showed that Albanian society has now changed its perception of such crimes, which only years ago were taboo.
- 2- Amendments have also been made to the Law on Measures against Violence in Family Relations and the respective secondary legislation, enabling the establishment and functioning of specific services and referral mechanisms at the local level to respond in a coordinated manner to cases of domestic violence. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention served to give one more impetus to initiatives like the establishment of a Free Counseling Hotline for women and girls, victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence, which is still in the process.
- 3- Amendments to the Law on Social Aid and Services introduced the right of women victims of violence to receive economic aid when they are subject to a protection order, the level of such aid, and the documentation that they have to submit. The improved secondary legislation also aimed at removing some restrictions on the admission criteria for victims of domestic violence in the National Centre for Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence. Economic aid is now collected by women, which serves for a better administration of this aid to vulnerable families.
- 4- Other significant amendments have been made to the Law on Legal Aid, which foresees, among others, the conditions, types, approach, criteria and procedures for the legal aid to be given to women victims of violence and women belonging to vulnerable groups.
- 5- Amendments to the Electoral Code in 2013 on parliamentary elections, now require at least 30% of the candidates on the multi-name lists of candidates to belong to each gender. In addition, as a result of the proposal of the Alliance of Women MPs for local government elections, one in every two consecutive names in the list of candidates for members of the city council shall belong to each gender, the current representation of women in city councils is 34.6% (from 12% after the 2011 elections) and 9 mayors (14.7%) out of a total of 61 mayors.
- 6- The approval of some amendments to the Labor Code in December 2015 introduced new provisions included: an improved definition of sexual harassment in the work place; the reversal of the burden of proof for sexual harassment in line with a recommendation given by the Committee in 2010; additional guarantees for women's return to work after their maternity leave; nondiscriminatory remuneration for all, etc. Amendments made to the Law on Social Insurance in 2014 also recognize the right for paternity leave. In addition, the Council of Ministers issued a decision recently to protect pregnant women and young mothers at work, determining in line with the European legislation, the elements of working hours and leave, as well as the type of work that is strictly forbidden for pregnant women.
- 7- The amendments made to the Law on Social Housing Programs for Residents of Urban Areas gives priority to divorced women with dependent children, women with disabilities, orphaned women (who have lived in institutions of social care until the age of 30), and returnee women immigrants.

In 2014, with the support of the UNDP, an assessment was made on the compliance of the Albanian legislation with the standards of CEDAW and Istanbul Convention. Consultation tables

were organized with various stakeholders to present this assessment. The Gender Equality Strategy for the coming years foresees several legal initiatives to be taken based on this assessment.

II- A series of strategies/action plans in the area of gender equality and fight against domestic violence, health, education, property rights, social protection, protection from discrimination, fight against trafficking in human beings, and protection for vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, Roma, etc.) have also been approved.

The implementation of the 2011-2015 Strategy for Gender Equality, the Reduction of Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence showed that despite achievements related especially with the legal framework, fight against violence against women, capacity building of professionals and empowerment of gender equality structures and against domestic violence, and increased public awareness, there is still work to be done by the state and society to ensure gender mainstreaming and eliminate discrimination against women.

The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth is leading the process of drafting a new Gender Equality Strategy for 2016-2020 with intensive efforts being made to advance gender equality and the fight against violence against women.

A National Plan for LGBTI Persons was approved in May 2016 for 2016-2020, which addressed the main problems and issues affecting LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex), creating inequality and discrimination. The Action Plan sets the main directions in the areas of legislation and development of policies, security, and protection of rights, as well as access to services.

The Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians, approved in December 2015 and the National Plan for People with Disabilities, approved in June this year introduced special measures for women belonging to these categories with a view to including and integrating them in the society, employment, and participation in, and access to all services.

III- Empowerment of the national mechanism for gender equality is also an objective of the Government of Albania, and part of the continuous recommendations given in the framework of several Conventions and Albania`s EU Integration.

The National Gender Equality Council, chaired by the Minister of Social Welfare and Youth, has recently strengthened its role in the approval of key documents and recommendations to improve gender equality in the country.

The network of gender employees in ministries and municipalities, and the local coordinators against violence are part of the country`s gender machinery.

In addition, women MPs have played an important role since the establishment – for the first time in 2013 – of Alliance of Women MPs in the Albanian Parliament with several legal initiatives.

Similarly, the Alliance of Women Councilors was established for the first time this year in the Municipality of Tirana helping women with social problems and economic empowerment.

Independent institutions like the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination and the People's Advocate not only monitor the implementation of human rights but also give significant recommendations.

Civil society is also very important for their expertise, partnership, initiatives to improve the status of women and girls, participation in consultation tables on documents like Strategies and Action Plans, legal amendments, awareness-raising campaigns, cooperation, support, legal counseling, etc.

We would like to particularly thank all UN agencies involved in the strengthening of the gender equality machinery, and the support given to the Gender Equality Sector at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth.

I would like to focus on my introductory statement on gender budgeting, which started in 2010.

Therefore, there has been a gradual increase of up to twenty mid-term budgetary programs for 2016-2018, which include full or partial elements of gender responsive budgeting. Another significant success in this area is related with the introduction of gender equality as a basic principle in the amendments approved by the beginning of June 2016 to the Organic Budget Law.

Madame Chair,

Albania has taken special temporary measures during these years regarding the participation of women in the political and public life, Police, and Defense through the application of some quotas.

Several pieces of secondary legislation are approved with a view to improving women's economic situation, including: the creation of a special fund for women entrepreneurs; the implementation of employment and vocational training programs for unemployed women jobseekers, giving priority to women and girls from specific groups; collection and administration of the economic aid by women;

Regarding the empowerment of rural women, the Ministry of Agriculture has ensured that women applicants are more favored than men when applying for financial support schemes. Beneficiaries of subsidy schemes are also mainly women farmers. With the budget approved for 2016, efforts are also being made to reduce gender inequality. About 11% of women farmers are supported through advisory services, and 1200 women are expected to be supported by national schemes.

The secondary legislation issued for the implementation of the Law on Pre-University Education System during 2014-2016 pays special attention to ensuring that education is inclusively guaranteeing that every student enjoys the right to quality education and equal opportunities for students from vulnerable families, students with disabilities, and students with learning problems.

A Decision of Council of Ministers sets the eligibility criteria for scholarships, giving priority to students from vulnerable social groups by treating them with full scholarship; in case of candidates who are equally eligible for scholarships, female students are given priority.

Provision of free school texts for students from vulnerable groups subsidized 100% by the state is another important measure to guarantee equal right to education for all.

Zero tolerance to violence against women and domestic violence is the main motto of the Albanian Government to achieve positive results whilst working with all actors.

The increased awareness and strengthened structures, along with better coordination in cases of domestic violence have led to an increased number of criminal proceedings, court protection orders, and more public sensitivity to this phenomenon.

With the coordination of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, in cooperation with central and local institutions, civil society organizations, and with the support of international organizations, several awareness-raising campaigns have been organised, such as the campaign of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence under the motto: Boys and men part of the solution – show you are against violence”; the “He for She” campaign to encourage the implementation of specific components of the National Action Plan for Men and Boys; and the UN UNiTE orange campaign.

I have to reiterate the fact that the media have given us significant support, by becoming an active part of our campaigns.

The Strategy against Trafficking in Persons and its Action Plan for 2014-2017 is drafted in full compliance with Article 6 of the CEDAW Convention. It includes all the Committee’s recommendations like legislative measures, effective prevention, intensification of the fight against internal trafficking, social and health support, rehabilitation and integration, and improvement of the monitoring system.

In 2015, the Assembly of Albania ratified the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Organs; A Memorandum of Understanding was signed among the National Coordinator, General Prosecutor, and State Police for the establishment of a Task Force for an integrated review of cases of trafficking in persons that were either suspended or never initiated; cooperation agreements have been signed with organizations working in this sector focusing particularly on children and youth for capacity building and empowerment of their state structure, etc.

Several amendments were proposed to the Criminal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure, which were designed as a comprehensive package of amendments based also on wide consultations;

In addition to the above, measures have been taken to provide social support to victims of trafficking, ensure effective prevention and raise public awareness

Empowerment of women and girls through their participation in decision-making, *a significant improvement is achieved* especially in terms of political and executive decision-making.

The State Police has supported Police women and girls, providing them with all the necessary opportunities for qualification and training for them to be able to be appointed in operational leading positions. We have today four women Police officers in such positions and a woman Chief of Police Commissariat. The program will continue but so far it has involved 26 women and girls.

Education is also one of the priority sectors the Government pays special attention to.

Girls made up 37% of the total number of students during the 2014/2015 academic year. The number of women graduates has increased. It is now 64%. Most University diplomas are in business, law, sciences with a ratio of 59% women and 41% men.

The ratio among secondary school graduates is 51.4% girls and 48.6 % boys.

65% of teachers in secondary education are women and 73% in mandatory education.

In terms of Employment, Albanian legislation bans discrimination in the area of employment, professional activity, and social insurance benefits.

The recent legal amendments to the Labor Code, Social Insurance Law, and reforms such as the Pension Reform, and the approval of a series of new bylaws in the area of employment and vocational training, or health and safety at work have harmonized the national legislation with international standards.

Further to the 2010 concluding observations of the Committee, the definition of sexual harassment in the Labor Code was improved, the burden of proof reversed, and training has been delivered in the twelve Police directorates, aiming at ensuring a safe and free working environment for all.

The Albanian Government has strongly focused on employment and development of skills. The National Strategy for Employment and Skills 2014-2020 was approved by the Government and is in line with the EU Employment Strategy for 2020. The strategy is the result of a gender-sensitive drafting process. *Increasing access for women and girls to employment in men-dominated domains is one of the goals of the strategy related to the changing of gender stereotypes in employment:*

The Government has increased employment programs over the past 2 years, with funds being five times more than in 2013. As a result, about 60% of the participants in these programs are women.

In June 2016, a Law on Social Enterprises was approved, which regulates the integration and re-integration of excluded people in the labor market, provision of services to communities or to certain groups, who do not have sufficient resources because of their age, health, or their family socio-economic situation, which deprives them of an active approach to the labor market. Social enterprises aim also at promoting gender equality in terms of increasing women's access to the labor market.

The Law on Craftsmanship which is just approved focuses on employment and dual vocational qualification in the area of craftsmanship and organization of craft activities. One of the forms of craftsmanship is the traditional one, i.e. the home-made crafts, which is characteristic mainly of women, especially rural women, who produce traditional products.

Despite measures taken recently by the Government against the informal economy, informality in rural areas and women's work at home still remains high. In the framework of the Decent Work Program 2016-2020, an integrated strategy is expected to be drafted by 2017 against undeclared work, taking also into consideration the gender component. This is going to be done in cooperation with our social partners.

The Government has seriously addressed pay gaps in wages and pensions between men and women. The gap was decreased from 18% in 2011 to 10% in 2014 and to 6.9% in 2015.

The social protection system is based on social insurance programs, economic aid, financial support of people with disabilities, and social services.

Amendments to the Social Insurance Law introduced a social pension for everyone above 70 years old. Above 90% of beneficiaries are women.

The Albanian Government has undertaken three major reforms: a) economic aid reform, b) disability evaluation reform, and c) social services reform.

Due to the economic aid reform, a more efficient and transparent use of a weighted formula has been used to better identify poor families and to ensure more efficiency and equality in the application of the Economic Aid Scheme. Also, economic aid is now collected by women (instead of heads of family, i.e. men).

In divorce proceedings, when no final court decision has been taken, women can apply for economic aid.

Families benefitting from the Economic Aid Scheme are given subsidies for every child who is vaccinated, and who pursues the mandatory education. This measure serves to discourage school dropout and to improve health care services for children.

Reforms in the health sector have also had a direct impact on the wellbeing of women and girls. The Albanian Government has declared Universal Health Coverage as its major objective, planned to be achieved by 2017. A medical checkup program offers services to about 940

thousand Albanian citizens, almost half of which are women and girls. In 2014, free checkups were provided to about 15 thousands women and girls, rising to 20 thousand per month in 2015. In addition, mobile mamography offer free services to more than 5 thousand women per year.

The 30% price decrease of medication for the two last years has also had a positive impact on the quality of life of women and girls.

The economic empowerment of women is a priority. The implementation of the Action Plan for women entrepreneurs and the application of projects for their support, as well as the Guarantee Fund, have given women more access to business.

According to the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 31.3% of the active businesses in 2015 were owned or managed by women, while in 2014 it was 28.5%. The number of self-employed women/business owners has increased by 4.9% between 2010 to 2015.

The Bank of Albania`s Register of Loans shows that between 2011-2015 the number of women loan beneficiaries is almost half that of men, and that the amount of loans received by women is half the amount received by men.

Changes to the procedures for the financing of women entrepreneurs have been made, giving a bonus to all project proposed by women entrepreneurs.

Although the number of family farms owned by women is very limited, most of the rural women are actually the ‘farms’ secret managers’ according to a UN Women study on rural women in Albania. Data also shows that women are more engaged in farm activities (32% compared with 22% in the case of men).

There are 152 farming organizations and cooperatives with 4460 members, of which 21% are women. 4.5 % of these associations and cooperatives are led by women.

The Inter-Sectorial Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2014-2020 focuses on compliance with the national legislation on gender equality and nondiscrimination.

Through its policies, the Ministry of Agriculture aims at extending its special services for financial support, legal counseling, and entrepreneurship skills to achieve the economic empowerment of women, and facilitate their participation in decision-making, including them as farmers, and not as ‘farmers’ wives’.

Madame Chair, Members of the Committee,

In closing, on behalf of the Albanian Government, I would like to express our commitment to work for the protection and implementation of women’s rights in all areas, eliminating violence against women and domestic violence, protecting their social and cultural rights, increasing their participation in the public life and empowering them economically.

Our dialogue with the Committee in reviewing this report and the Committee recommendations will be our roadmap so as to improve the implementation of women's rights, and their economic, social and cultural development, as well as their participation in the public life of Albanian society.

Thank you.