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PERMANENT MISSION
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
TO THE INTERNATIONAL
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VIENNA

Address to the 987th OSCE Permanent Council
by Minister of Social Welfare and Youth of the Republic of Albania
H.E.Mr. Erion Veliaj
Vienna, 6 March 2014

Dear Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished members of the Permanent Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to speak before you today to highlight the efforts of the Government of Albania to promote gender equality and combat domestic violence and gender based violence in the country.

Let me start my remarks by first of all expressing my Government's and my personal appreciation for the very important assistance that the OSCE has provided throughout the last two decades to promote peace, stability and democratic values in Albania and across our region.

Allow me also to express my Government's appreciation for the continuous actions and efforts undertaken by the OSCE in promoting protection of women's rights, preventing and combating violence against women and achieving gender equality.

Women's rights are integral to human rights, and the Government of Albania fully recognizes that "true equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of a just and democratic society based on the rule of law."

In order to evidence its commitment to achieve such true equality, my Government has ratified all relevant international instruments and integrated them into its legislation, with a view to establishing a gender equality legal framework and standards aligned with the highest international standards.

My Government sees the adoption of gender equality legislation and policies as reflecting the country's progress towards European integration. We are committed to working closely with our European partners and others to effectively improve the lives of women and girls across the country.

As an expression of Albania's political commitment to attain a Europe free from violence against women and domestic violence, we were the second State to ratify the Istanbul Convention. We have taken a number of actions since to make progress in aligning the reality of life for Albanian women and families with the guarantees and protections provided by our legal and institutional framework.

Achieving greater equality between women and men however, will require sustained changes at many levels, including changes in attitudes and relationships, changes in institutions and legal frameworks, changes in economic institutions, and changes in political decision-making structures.

On the last note in particular, allow me to express my pleasure that the composition of the Albanian government with six women Ministers, reflects this commitment in practice. However, more remains to be done to achieve equal representation of women in political life and thus their full participation in the public sphere.

As the Minister of Social Welfare and Youth, bearing the bulk of government responsibilities in this area, we are focusing our efforts across a number of sectors, working to initiate awareness, educational and information campaigns, improvements as prevention measures and completion of the legal framework, in building and strengthening capacities of various

professionals, in establishing and consolidating coordinated response systems at the central and local level – all actions that comply with the obligations set by the Istanbul Convention.

Our strategy in addressing violence against women in particular is guided by a three-pronged approach. Our efforts are focused on working to:

- Prevent gender-based violence by engaging all relevant State entities at local and central level, civil society and faith-based organizations, especially addressing men and boys as partners in these efforts. (A National Plan of Action on Boys and Man Involvement as Partners in fighting dom. Violence and gender based violence).
- Ensure that every woman and girl who is subjected to violence has access to efficient and quality oriented services that guarantee their protection and rehabilitation and their rights to society.
- End impunity for all perpetrators of violence against women by ensuring an effective legal response.

Due to this increased awareness about gender equality and emerging erosion of gender stereotypes, citizens have started to speak up about issues that were considered taboo until not so long ago, such as violence perpetrated against women, even in their own homes.

In addition, these awareness campaigns have led more and more frequently to victims approaching law enforcement agencies, resulting in higher report rates of violence, issuance of protection orders and eventually more convictions of perpetrators.

Ever since adopting the Convention, to adequately prepare for its implementation, Albania engaged in a wide consultative process with civil society organizations, experts in the field, and others that lead to the drafting of a Roadmap for the Implementation of the Convention.

This Roadmap pointed out concrete actions that needed to be taken to facilitate implementation and alerted the Government on eventual costs, a process crucial to prioritisation of measures and adequate budgeting.

One of the requirements of the Convention is the collection of statistics on domestic violence. Just a couple of months ago, the preliminary findings of the second National Survey on Domestic Violence were shared and discussed among professionals of gender-based violence experts.

This Survey was carried out according to the standards of the Istanbul Convention. The results provide a sound basis for shaping the Government's future policy and will provide reliable data to other researchers and activists that are dedicated to working to curb gender-based violence.

To enhance support for domestic violence victims, my Ministry is moving forward with the establishment of the National Coordination and Referral Mechanism against Domestic Violence across the country. The mechanism, already operating in some 24 municipalities, brings together cross-sector government entities at the central and local level as well as non-governmental organizations to work together in order to identify, assess, provide support, think and act on long term solutions for victims of domestic violence at the community level.

Furthermore, major investments were made to build the capacities of all those professional groups tackling domestic violence and assisting victims, such as judges, prosecutors, bailiffs, police, social workers, health personnel, teachers and civil servants at the central and the local level.

In addition to the Referral Mechanism, we intend to install within this year an online national registration system to ensure that all cases of domestic violence are registered and their treatment properly followed through. A nationally available toll-free telephone line for victims of domestic violence will also soon be available.

The legal framework has been amended to provide free legal aid to victims of domestic violence and we are now working to ensure that, in practice, legal assistance is regularly offered to women and girls in need and to victims of domestic violence, a service currently provided primarily by civil society organisations.

Empowerment of women and girls is essential to ensuring *de facto* gender equality and thereby contribute significantly to the reduction of gender-based and domestic violence. This is why, as the State entity responsible for employment and professional education, my Ministry is committed to ensuring better access of women to the labour market.

Our newly released National Strategy for Jobs and Skills 2014 – 2020 fully reflects this commitment to provide enhanced opportunities to women in the area of vocational education and training as well as employment.

Despite this progress however, violence against women and children in Albania still remains a worrying phenomenon. Its roots run deep into societal attitudes. Achieving sustained progress in this area requires ongoing commitment not only by the Government, but also by civil society organizations, international partners, and by society at large.

I would therefore like to close by reiterating once again the commitment of the Government of Albania to ensure compliance with the Istanbul Convention in developing and implementing policies and programmes that effectively contribute to preventing and combating violence against women and families. Indeed, our full development as a society, as one of the OSCE key documents states, requires nothing less than “the full and equal participation of men and women.”

We will have to make the most of the country’s resources and will rely on help from our allies, such as OSCE, European Commission, as well as other Member States.

8th of March, International Women Day is approaching, I’d like to congratulate and wish all women in the OSCE delegations and other delegations, Happy Women’s Day.

Thank you.