

JOINT STATEMENT ON COOPERATION OF THE INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS SIX (WB6) AND CROATIA

Having regard to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women,

Recalling the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, signed in Beijing in 1995, and especially paragraphs 301-305, Section B. Regional Cooperation, and the Declaration on Cooperation of Gender Institutional Mechanisms of the Western Balkan (Sarajevo Declaration) from 2005,

Taking into consideration the Declaration on Equality between Women and Men of the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 “Women, Peace and Security”, UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security and the EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence;

Aware of the inseparable connection between gender equality and the socio-economic prosperity of society, which is why gender is included in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, not only as an independent goal no. 5, but also as an intersectoral principle necessary to achieve every other goal,

Convinced that ensuring equal opportunities and gender equality in all spheres of public and private life is of vital importance for sustainable development to all Western Balkan societies, and elimination of gender-based discrimination;

Bearing in mind the need to ensure coherence, continuity, transparency and close cooperation in the work of institutional mechanisms for gender equality and civil sector in the Western Balkans Six (WB6) and Croatia, and of mainstreaming mechanisms in the European integration processes

Concerned about the increasingly present, orchestrated, well-financed and organized backlash against women's rights and the rights of other marginalized groups in the region and beyond, which threatens to stop or even reverse the progress we have achieved so far in advancing gender equality and considering the persistent underfunding of gender equality mechanisms, and emphasizing the need for dedicated and sufficient budget allocations from national and local governments to ensure the effective implementation of gender equality commitments,

Convinced that by strengthening cooperation at the regional level, institutional mechanisms for gender equality can work on harmonized strategies and undertake joint actions aimed at strengthening the protection and promotion of women's human rights, thus promoting the implementation of relevant international instruments in this area,

Having considered and noted all the foregoing, we, the representatives of the legislative, supervisory, executive and independent mechanisms for gender equality and protection against discrimination (institutional mechanisms), reaffirm our commitment and sign the following

JOINT STATEMENT

on

Cooperation of the Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Equality and Protection against Discrimination of the Western Balkans Six (WB6) and Croatia

The main goal of this Joint Statement is to confirm the commitment to stronger regional cooperation on gender equality issues and the advancement of the status of women and girls, which are in the common interest of Participants. This implies a continuous flow of information and statistical evidence, exchange of experiences and good practices, knowledge exchange and use of knowledge between gender and human rights experts, and the initiation of agreements and projects related to gender equality and launching and promoting joint initiatives.

We further recognize that regional peace and development efforts must integrate the meaningful participation of youth, including young women and men, in line with the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda.

Specific objectives/strategic priorities established on the basis of our shared activities and exchange of experiences, and in line with competencies of each institutional mechanism, so far are:

In the area of **institutional mechanisms for gender equality and protection against discrimination**, with emphasis on:

- Determining and implementing a regional gender policy,
- Functioning of the established regional coordination body;

In the area of **gender equality, peace and security**, with emphasis on:

- Exchanging experiences in the design and implementation of activities adhering to the aims of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 “Women, Peace and Security”, as an instrument for achieving a safer and more secure environment, and the local community networking in the context of implementation of the Resolution 1325 at local level,
- Continuing the work on education and integration of gender equality issues in the security sector, including the concept of “human security”, while actively involving youth in community-based safety and conflict prevention initiatives,
- Ensuring and promoting equal participation in decision-making on achieving and maintaining peace and security, including the participation and leadership of young people,
- Working on joint regional campaigns to promote the objectives and content of the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2022)¹⁷ on protecting the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls, with a focus on youth engagement in humanitarian response and protection;
- Working on joint regional campaigns to promote the objectives and content of the UN CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 38 on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration, including youth-focused awareness and prevention efforts.

In the area of **empowerment of women in economic and public life and decision-making positions**, with emphasis on:

- Creating policies and/or recommendations for policy making aimed at addressing the challenges of economic empowerment of women for economic development, including marginalized women and girls' groups,
- Launching women's initiatives, and establishing a link between economic empowerment of women, security and environment,
- Implementing education of women in the concept and valuation of the paid, unpaid and community work,
- Exchanging experiences on gender budget analysis and gender-sensitive budgeting
- Exchanging experiences and good practices in protection against discrimination in the field of economic and public life and in decision-making positions;
- Undertaking joint initiatives to promote adhering to the goals of CEDAW General recommendation no. 40 on equal and inclusive representation of women and men (50:50 parity) in all spheres of decision-making, including political, public, economic and private, as well as digital spaces, and EU directives 2022/2381 on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures;
- Undertaking joint efforts for increasing the regional governments' investment in the care economy,
- Exchanging experiences on innovative initiatives for the improvement of social services (e.g. support for the sick, elderly, infirm and other persons in a state of need) including initiatives rooted in the community and/or the civil sector;
- Advocating for institutionalized and ring-fenced budget lines at the national and local level for the implementation of gender equality policies, action plans, and specialized services, including those for young people and marginalized women and girls.

In the area of **gender equality and protection from violence**, with emphasis on:

- Undertaking joint efforts to ensure adhering to the aims of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence,
- Continuing cooperation on joint regional campaigns for funding of specialized services for women and girls, victims of violence and trafficking,
- Strengthening the regional zero-tolerance approach to all forms of violence and discrimination, closer trans boundary police cooperation, harmonization of laws, and in particular sanctions, exchange of practical experiences and commitments between institutions in the region,
- Exchanging experiences and creating policies with innovative solutions to support victims after they leave the circle of violence, including legal support, measures for successful implementation of the obligation to pay alimony, and destigmatization,
- Promoting adequate and sustainable public budget allocation to ensure the provision, expansion, and quality of essential services for survivors of violence, in line with international standards.

In the area of: **gender equality and cyber-space**, with emphasis on:

- Influencing the creation of policies through recommendations and initiatives for adhering to the goals of the Group of experts of the Council of Europe for action against violence

against women and domestic violence (GREVIO) Recommendation no. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women,

- Undertaking joint efforts for adhering to the goals of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on artificial intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law (2024),
- Cooperating on the preparation, implementation and promotion of measures to eliminate gender bias present in artificial intelligence (AI) products with the aim of integrating the principle of gender equality in the phase when AI systems are conceptualized and programmed, while engaging young women in the co-creation of inclusive and gender-sensitive digital technologies,
- Exchanging experiences and joint initiatives aimed at encouraging girls to opt for "STEM" in education and encouraging women to opt for careers in the IT industry, including artificial intelligence development and scholarly work in this field with an emphasis on youth-led innovation, digital literacy and participation.

In the area of **gender equality and environmental conservation**, with emphasis on:

- Addressing the effects of natural disasters, which have the greatest impact on women, and special measures that should be adopted to meet the needs of these women in the process of rehabilitation of affected areas,
- Utilizing knowledge of institutional mechanisms for gender equality and protection against discrimination and non-governmental organizations that should be used for the purpose of the gender equality impact assessment in this process,
- Identifying the special needs of both men and women in the areas affected by natural disasters and developing or encouraging support programs accordingly
- Working on joint regional campaigns to promote the goals and content of the UN CEDAW-Committee's General Recommendation No. 37 (2018) on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in a changing climate in close collaboration with youth activists and youth-led green initiatives across the region.

In the area of: **anti-gender backlash actions and narrative**, with emphasis on:

- Improving cooperation, exchange of experiences and practices on the preparation and implementation of adequate measures to oppose anti-gender narratives and actions including youth-centered digital awareness, civic education and campaigns to build resilience and counter disinformation,
- Increasing detection and exchange of information on anti-gender initiatives with the aim of cooperation and joint action towards political decision-makers (e.g. towards representatives of the executive or legislative authorities, upon learning that some anti-gender policy is in the phase of preparation, adoption or implementation) while amplifying youth voices and youth-led movements promoting equality and democracy.

Implementation of the general goal and specific objectives/strategic priorities implies:

1. Continuation of activities of the Regional Coordination Body consisting of representatives of regional institutional mechanisms for gender equality and protection against discrimination; the body will be responsible for the implementation, monitoring, reporting, promotion and evaluation of all common regional objectives, activities and conclusions; the body will promote gender equality within the Berlin Process and other regional initiatives as a key component of democratization, development and integration in the European Union, and will hold regular annual meetings with possible rotation of meeting hosts.
2. Adoption of annual operational work plans that will define in detail the joint activities serving the purpose of implementing the objectives outlined in this Regional Joint Statement. These plans shall include estimated financial needs and advocate for dedicated budget allocations at national and regional levels to implement agreed priorities.
3. The signatory mechanisms commit to advocate jointly for increased domestic and international funding for gender equality, and for the integration of gender-responsive budgeting into national budget cycles, as a precondition for effective implementation of the commitments outlined in this Statement.

The Joint Statement shall be open to other mechanisms for Gender Equality and Protection against Discrimination in the wider region.