

Work-life balance as a leverage for women's empowerment and promoting gender equality High Level Conference of the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Liliana Palihovici, Special Representative

of the OSCE Chairperson- in-Office on Gender (OSCE)

Honorable audience,

I salute you and thank you for the opportunity to participate in this interesting and timely discussion. In the last two years, the new coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has deeply disrupted people's lives with far-reaching social and economic repercussions. Governments faced huge implications in crafting timely and effective responses and recovery efforts from the pandemic's disruptions and its compounded social and economic impacts. The pandemic has shifted gender dynamics and inclusivity efforts, rendering women, children and vulnerable and disadvantaged households and groups more exposed to deep-seated socio-economic inequalities and preexisting vulnerabilities.

Many countries that were able to suppress initial outbreaks were experiencing in the 2021 the second and third waves of infections, which in some countries have reached a critical stage. In the 2021, the pandemic deepened its surge with a terrible and clouded socio-economic outlook.

Analyzing the developments in the last two years in promoting gender equality, it should be pointed that the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to wipe out progress from 25 years of efforts dedicated to increasing gender equality.

The pandemic has shifted gender dynamics and inclusivity efforts, rendering women, children, and disadvantaged groups, more exposed to deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities and preexisting vulnerabilities. The pandemic has also triggered a labour market crisis of significant proportions. This crisis has had disproportionately negative effects on women, particularly those who face multiple and intersecting discrimination. The impacts of COVID-19 on women in the labour market has rolled back progress, particularly for those women and vulnerable groups at greatest risk of joblessness, poverty, increased inequality and who risk long-term, crisis-induced socio-economic scarring.

The socio-economic policy responses adopted by national governments in Europe and Central Asia over the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic were diverse. Areas of intervention fell largely into three categories: social protection measures; labour market measures; and economic, fiscal, and business support measures. The undertaken measures under these categories, include both emergency and recovery measures taken to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and to build resilience against future crises. Some countries' priority measures have been accompanied by longer-term socio-economic recovery efforts.

Is commendable that the governments of 18 countries from Europe and Central Asia revised their national budgets to offer emergency state fiscal assistance packages. These varied in scope and scale, ranging from 0.15% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 9 % in Kazakhstan and to 12.8% in Turkey. All governments also launched emergency responses to address the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, 477 social protection, labor market, and economic, fiscal, and business support measures were recorded as introduced and/or enhanced.

The analysis of recorded **measures taken from a gender lens reveals that of the 477 measures, only 34 (7 %) specifically reference women and can therefore be classified as gender-sensitive.** These evidence **calls for governments to prioritize adequate and timely gender-responsive policies in the context of COVID-19 and other crises.**

Analyzing the situation per regions/countries, the picture is the following:
The five Central Asia countries (*Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan*), which have historically had less developed *and more fragile social and economic systems*, introduced **83 measures**, that were mostly in the social protection category, followed by measures in the economic, fiscal, and business category, and in the labour market category. **Of these, only three measures (4 %)** from two countries – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – can be classified as being gender-sensitive.

The six Eastern Partnership countries (**Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine**) adopted **209** measures, of which more than half of them fall under the social protection category, and the rest to the economic, fiscal, and business category, and the labor market. **Only 13 measures (6 %)** from total number of measures), from four countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova) can be classified as being gender-sensitive.

The six Western Balkan countries (**Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia**) and **Turkey** adopted **185 measures** in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. **Of these: only 18 measures (10%)** from all seven countries can be classified as being gender-sensitive.

The immediate government responses have focused on addressing urgent social and economic needs. **However, analysis of these responses suggests that most of the measures introduced were not designed with a gender lens.**

So, the conclusion now, at the distance of two years, from the beginning of this pandemic is, that, **the approaches in development and implementation of national public policies should be changed, if we want to reduce the level of vulnerability of women. All emergency responses should be gender sensitive and focused on**

- building **more inclusive labour markets** for women and vulnerable groups.
- Diversifying the SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES and making sure that we offer solution for decreasing **unpaid work volume, that as usually is increasing during crises.** Formally recognize unpaid domestic and care work as real and critical work that contributes to social and economic life.
- **Undertake gender-responsive assessments** and evaluations of current social protection programs and systems and to adjust public policies in all areas of development in line with the results of gender assessments.

We need to make sure that the governmental interventions on social and economic dimensions, ensure the full access for women to the job market, the access to qualitative education, including vocational education and training, eliminate all legislative barriers that are facilitating the discrimination of women, ensure equal payment, and create an environment where men and women share the household and childcare responsibilities.

My firm believe today is that the national governments should improve the Emergency Response and **Build More Inclusive Social Protection Systems.**

Thank you for your attention!