**Albania’s contribution on the thematic report of The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls on “Women’s and girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights in situations of crisis” to be presented on the 47th session of the Human Rights Council in June 2021*.***

*Undertaken measures during Covid 19*

Since the beginning of the emergency period, Government of Albania and particularly MoHSP have been very careful on providing a gender sensitive response to COVID situation, by undertaking specific measures targeting most vulnerable groups of women in need.

1. Some of the key actions to mention on this direction are:

1. Women with an issued protection order, women head of families and women under economic aid scheme were amongst the first groups included in the economic measures’ package of the government, to benefit the double payment of what they usually get.
2. The non-suspension of the work in judiciary for family cases related to domestic violence, child custody, children’s rights and adoption process, alimentary and in some other civil and criminal cases, was followed also by the improvement of the Criminal Code, particularly on the article 130/a “Domestic Violence”, as proposed with the initiative of some women MPs. The amendments consist on tightening of penalties for abusers and are in line with the recommendations of the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW Convention which require from State Parties to take all legislative measures to punish perpetrators and eliminate violence against women.
3. Different measures are taken to ensure an increase of coordination, promotion of effective collaboration and immediate response for cases’ managements despite all restrictions and precautionary measures.
4. Immediate measures are undertaken to create an enabling environment for ensuring the continuity of specialist support services for women, children and family members in risk or victims/survivors of violence. Particular attention has been paid to the preparation and adoption of protocols, regulations and operating standards of specialized support services so that these services provide protection, support and professional treatment in accordance with the restrictions and rules to be followed in pandemic conditions. Here, among others we can mention:
* By Order no. 254, dated 10.04.2020 of the Minister of Health and Social Protection was approved “Protocol for the operation of public and non-public residential centers that provide housing services (shelters) for victims of domestic violence and trafficking in the situation of the COVID pandemic- 19 ". The implementation of this protocol aims to provide the necessary service to victims of domestic violence and trafficking without compromising their health and life or that of service providers, families and the community as a whole, respecting the minimum standards for this support service, respecting the legislation in force and in accordance with the Istanbul Convention.
* The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has prepared the Protocol on “Management of Domestic Violence Cases at the local level through the Coordinated Referral Mechanism (NRM) during the Covid-19 situation”. The implementation of this protocol aims to unify the way of coordinated management of domestic violence cases at the local level by the members of the Interdisciplinary Technical Team (ETN), respecting all the steps presented in the case management protocol under normal conditions and by drawing attention to the increased measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.
* The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has supported the Center for Management of Sexual Violence Cases "Lilium" to prepare an internal regulation of the operation of this center and case management in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.For the most correct implementation of the above protocols, several online training sessions were held with representatives of the relevant institutions and Coordinated Referral Mechanisms in the municipality, as well as with service providers in shelters.
* An awareness Video Spot reminding citizens their moral and legal right to report any case of domestic violence they might hear/know that’s happening, especially now during the COVID-19 restriction, where also national free helpline number (116 117) and police number (129) for cases’ reporting are also provided, is published in MoHSP webpage.

2. Sexual violence against women and girls has been and remains one of the most difficult forms of violence to deal with, due to the attitude of society towards it, while during the pandemic period several cases of abuse of minors were reported. The Center for Management of Cases of Sexual Violence "LILIUM", adapted the internal regulation for the situation and responded to cases professionally by coordinating with long-term services. The Center for Management of Cases of Sexual Violence "Lilium" (the only one of its kind so far in Albania that offers forensic examination, evidence collection and specialized short-term services, including 72-hour accommodation) has handled 15 cases for the period January - June 2020 of which 5 adults and 10 minors. (During the period of isolation due to Covid-19, ie March - May 2020, 3 victims of female sexual violence were treated, of which 2 minors and 1 adult). Also, during July 2020 5 cases of sexually abused minors were treated in this center.

3. A rapid need assessment of the specialist support services providing sheltering (short-term or long-term) for victims/survivors of violence against women and domestic violence is prepared from the specific Sector for Social Inclusion and Gender Equality in MoHSP, focused on identifying their needs for protective and hygienic materials for their staff and beneficiaries; their capacities and potentials to create the isolation room inside the shelter spaces; their need for a possible training on the new protocol of their functioning in the COVID-19 emergency; their need for training and capacity building activities, etc. There are analysed the needs of 19 shelters (short-term and long term,focused on VAW&DV, trafficking of human beings as a form of VAW, children (abused in family relations, or victims/potential victims of trafficking, as well as on LBGTI community, plus the centre for management of sexual violence crisis). Their specific needs/requests for training and capacity building activities were already mentioned above (as suggested points to be focused the potential technical assistance and support from CoE)

 **Gender Equality**

Since the beginning of the emergency period, the Government of Albania and especially the MoHSP has been very careful in providing a gender sensitive response to the COVID situation, taking specific measures targeting the most vulnerable groups of women in need.

1. Data on domestic violence cases by the State Police during the period March - May 2020 show that there is no increase over the same period as last year in terms of denunciations and fortunately no homicides occurred due to domestic violence. During the period of Covid Pandemic 19, police data show that during the period March-May 2020, 655 cases of domestic violence were identified compared to the same period of 2019, where 928 cases were identified. Also, from the police data on cases of domestic violence for the period January-June 2020, a total of 2053 cases of domestic violence were identified, 184 cases or about 7.6% less than during the same period of 2019, where 2237 cases were identified. 1206 cases of domestic violence were handled with a request-lawsuit for the issuance of an Immediate Protection Order, or 158 cases less handled with a request-lawsuit than during the period of 2019, where 1364 cases were handled.

2.The calls to the National Help Line for Women and Girls 116-117, showed that during the period January-March, a total of 948 calls came to the National Help Line. While during March 2020, the National Line has had an increase of about 30% in the number of calls received, compared to the same period last year. It should be noted that during April-May 2020 the number of calls has increased by about 50% compared to last year.

3.Housing is one of the main issues in the services provided to victims of domestic violence, which even during the pandemic should be treated with caution, because the emergencies and the rules that must be applied such as quarantine make it more difficult to provide this service. Institutions and professionals were not prepared to meet the special needs of women and men, girls and boys, including those from vulnerable groups to cope with the situation. This showed that the situation of domestic violence during emergency situations should be handled with care and attention.

 **Children**

Children are another target group which has been given special priority and attention during the Covid-19 pandemic, in parallel with the protection and health of the population as a whole. It is noticed that cases of child abuse of girls and boys have not been absent even in the months of social distancing and isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however the institutions responsible for the protection of children's rights and the management of their cases have reacted immediately and professionally. During this period, Child Protection Units across the country have reported 32 cases of children who have suffered various forms of violence and abuse, as follows:

- 21 cases of children abused in the family; of which 6 children were directly abused and 15 children witnessed violence against their mothers, which were also provided with protection orders;

- 6 cases of sexually abused children, of which 4 cases were reported to the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child and managed by Child Protection Units.

 **Roma and Egyptian minorities**

The Government of Albania due to the pandemic situation has taken series of measures to help the most vulnerable including Roma minorities.

* The Council of Ministers (DCM) on 27 of March 2020 approved a measure that will finance Roma families additional payment from the Economic Aid, for the above mention social groups and those who were targeted by the earthquake.
* The interest rate caused by electricity payment delays are absolved for all.
* The Ministry of Defense in collaboration with the municipalities has distributed food packages to families for three different categories: beneficiaries of economic aid, people that have lost properties and housing during the earthquake and people without property and housing.
* There are regular disinfection and sanitary measures taken at the Roma communities.
* Municipality of Tirana had covered the rent accommodation expenses for 385 families benefiting from social housing, during the period March-April 2020.
* The Government of Albania decided to support Roma families with 129 EUR or (16000 Lek) that were not part of Economic Aid scheme because of not fulfilling technical conditions to benefit while applying from July 2019 –April 2020.
* The Government of Albania is planning to include the Roma and Egyptian families to the recovery plane and priority for social protection for the period 2020-2025.