**MINISTRIA E SHËNDETËSISË DHE MBROJTJES SOCIALE**

**REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA**

**MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE**

**Inputs to inform the report by the Secretay General on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide:**

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection designs policies and programs for the rights and protection of children, focusing its work towards creating a system as effective as possible, which guarantees rights of the children and ensures their protection from all forms of violence and their use, in fulfillment of the principles of intersectoral cooperation. This effective system aims to strengthen the responsiveness of all structures and their defense mechanisms.

Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child" defines the rights, access to rights, the protection enjoyed by every child, the responsible mechanisms that guarantee the effective implementation of supervision, the promotion and protection of these rights, as well as the special care for children, the proper functioning of the responsible institutions, charged with taking concrete measures to promote, respect and protect the rights of the child.

The Family Code regarding the age of marriage states that marriage can be concluded between a man and a woman who have reached the age of 18. The court of the country where the marriage takes place, for important reasons, may allow the marriage even before this age.

The strategic document "National Agenda for Children's Rights 2012-2026", approved by VKM No. 659, dated 03.11.2021, in one of the main strategic pillars "Elimination of all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse and harmful practices", provides measures, which aim for children to grow up in a supportive environment, with practices positive parenting skills that protect them from violence and abuse. For the realization of this goal in one of the objectives, which has to do with addressing negative social norms in the community and family, within the framework of preventing and addressing violence against children, measures have been provided that have to do with the drafting of a communication plan and supporting materials/products to address the negative social norms related to all forms of violence/abuse against children, including the topic of early marriages.

National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030, approved with VKM No. 400, dated 30.6.2021 in one of the strategic goals related to the reduction of all forms of harmful practices, gender-based violence and domestic violence, with the aim of empowering women, young people and girls from all groups, to have full control, to decide freely and responsibly on issues related to sexual and reproductive health. Also, a measure has been provided that has to do with strengthening the capacities of professionals, the judiciary to implement the improved legal framework, to support girls at risk and to prevent early child marriages.

In the National Action Plan for equality, inclusion and participation of Roma and Egyptians, 2021-2025, objectives and measures for the protection and promotion of rights and equality for Roma women and girls are defined. At the same time, measures related to benefits in social services, health services, inclusion in society and integration through education, housing and free legal aid, registration in civil status affecting the empowerment of Roma and Egyptian families.

The new Draft Action Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health, which is actually drafting by Ministry of Health and Social Protection, aims to improve the sexual and reproductive health status of the entire population, increasing equal access to universal reproductive health services, improving the quality, efficiency, effectiveness of services and improving their response to the needs of the population. This plan also aims to provide universal, integrated, quality and accessible, effective, acceptable and safe sexual and reproductive health services for individuals, families and communities. One of the main components of this plan is health for teenagers. Adolescent health services in Albania are part of the package of primary care services, where some responsibilities of the family doctor and nursing staff are described in relation to adolescent health, as service providers for young people and adolescents.

It has begun the piloting of the establishment of Socio-Health Centers that will provide psycho-social support to the entire population, focusing on investing in prevention and early intervention programs, building psycho-social support and counseling mechanisms, as well as strengthening mental health education in schools and universities, increasing health literacy, addressing stigma, and improving of the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents for seeking help. Initially, this project has been extended to 50 health centers, while it is expected to cover most of the health centers within 2023.

Strengthening health services for adolescents, focusing in particular on mental health and sexual and reproductive health services, are essential not only to protect the individual right of children to health services, but also to promote the coverage of adolescents with services, as well as to prevent possible increases in teenage birth rates and increases in adolescent HIV prevalence and incidence.

During the year 2022, many awareness meetings were held with school students regarding sexual and reproductive health. At the same time, work was done to increase professional capacities, in 2022 and 2023, 40 doctors, part of the health staff in schools, were trained in this matter.

At the local level, near each municipality, Child Protection Units have been established and are responsible for identifying, evaluating, protecting and providing services to children at risk from any form of violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect. Currently, there are 241 child protection workers in the country, in 61 municipalities and administrative units, who manage the cases of children in need of protection.

From the reports received by the Child Protection Units in all municipalities, it results that the phenomenon of forced early marriages is not a widespread phenomenon. Child marriage has been softening and has recently become a very rare phenomenon.

There are several cases of cohabitation of minor girls with peers or older people, which have been influenced by parental neglect, feeding with traditional or community culture. In general, these cases belong to the Roma and Egyptian national minorities due to their culture, traditional norms, poverty, etc. However, a very big change has been noticed in this community as recently many girls and boys are aware, attending school or vocational training courses.

In the educational system, in extracurricular classes, topics related to the elimination of gender inequalities, gender stereotypes, discrimination, the phenomenon of early and forced marriages are developed. In the same way, the right support is provided so that all families, especially those in economic difficulties, can send their children to school.

In cooperation with education structures, the Child Protection Units identifies children who are not enrolled in school or who have dropped out of school and works with the family to enroll and return them to school. Child Protection Units cooperate with health care centers in order to promote the reporting of cases of domestic violence, or other incidents that can prevent the phenomenon of early marriages.

Likewise, the State Social Service has intervened to provide services and medical checks for girls and women in need, as well as legal support with legal and psychological services. For any health problem, including sexual and reproductive health, girls and women are referred to the health center near where they live, to receive free health services, as well as to be directed to specialized services according to their needs.

For the year 2022, no girl under the age of 18 has married in Albania. According to official data, 18,782 marriages were registered during the year 2022 and for the first time there is no marriage under the age of 18.

**Call with UNFPA Albania: Girls leaving schools bc engaged. EU funds – analysis. So-called informal engagement is an issue that young ppl themselves identified. Registration is the last mile. How many young women have given birth before age of 18, doing math. Civil registration stats indeed show no marriage before age of 18. UNFPA does not talk about official stats only but harmful practice, fact that young ppl in adminstrative units have mentioned the issue of early unions. Policy document to be shared with Parliament this year – to align with EU integration requirements (age of consent 16). Article on 14 April on sexual abuse, age of first intercourse as young as 13. Sexual abuse and harassment before age of 18, disseminating results this result. UNFPA podcast on child marriage this year. Policy doc on age of consent – close link with SexEd. Children 2021-22 report shows abuse but link with official data, regional findings. Survey disseminated every 4 years. Albania draft law on sexual reproductive rights by MoHSP. Discussed gender thematic group the law and importance to mainstream gender in the law. Streategic document she will send.**