

Unleashing Economic Growth Potential in the Western Balkans by Improving Gender Equality in Access to Economic Opportunities

Meeting of Western Balkans Regional Partners *Communique*

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We, the Regional Partners of the Western Balkans, affirm that the ambitious goal of inclusive and sustainable economic development must include a firm commitment to gender equality in access to economic opportunities. While the Western Balkans region has made progress in promoting inclusion in economic opportunities, gaps persist. Estimates suggest that we lose on average about 18 percent of GDP every year due to gender gaps in the labor market. Approximately, one-third of this loss is due to distortions in the choice of occupations between men and women, and two-thirds to the costs associated with gaps in labor force participation. Girls and women in the Western Balkans, although better educated than ever before, still do not participate equally in the labor market, and when they are employed they are more likely to be employed in low-skilled and low-paying jobs. Women also tend to undertake most of the responsibility of unpaid care and domestic work, have less access to credit, and are less likely than men to have fair career prospects and hold leadership positions in private and public life.

Understanding that moving this agenda forward requires a shift from projects to policy reform and the alignment of several actors, we commit to support reforms that foster cross-sectoral coordination on gender equality in three priority areas:

- (i) Access to assets, particularly land and property,
- (ii) Access to jobs and decent work, and
- (iii) Strengthening institutions to monitor progress on gender equality.

We commit to promoting equity in assets, particularly through the recognition of ownership of immovable property. We acknowledge that the current legislative framework can be improved to reduce barriers that hinder women's access to immovable property, and that the uneven implementation and enforcement of laws impedes women's ability to own, manage, control, and in some instances, inherit property and enjoy the economic and financial benefits of that ownership. This further curtails women's opportunities to access finance and engage in entrepreneurship. We, therefore, commit to promoting reforms that: (i) increase uptake, transparency, and accountability in the procedures for immovable property registration, and (ii) enhance the ability of service providers involved in the process of registration of immovable property to implement the provisions and procedures to recognize ownership of immovable property. Measures supported by the reforms will contribute to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 5.8, and are in line with the objectives set forth in Chapter 23 of the European Union's *Acquis Communautaire* (Fundamental Rights and Access to Justice).

We commit to removing legal and institutional barriers to promote labor market participation. We acknowledge that women's employment decisions result from interactions between prevailing gender and social norms. Various factors constrain women's labor force participation, including

occupational sex segregation, lack of care services for dependents (children, sick, and the elderly), and legal, regulatory and social restrictions. We, therefore, commit to: (i) improving labor regulation, particularly around provisions on equality between men and women in employment and social policy, and (ii) promoting reforms to remove barriers to labor force participation for women and vulnerable groups. These measures are in line with European Union requirements on equal employment opportunities for all.

We commit to strengthening institutional arrangements, at the country and regional levels, to support social inclusion. We acknowledge that it is necessary to have a strong institutional mechanism to regulate and oversee the planning and reporting on equity and gender equality commitments. We, therefore, commit to implementing policy reforms that (i) enhance the ability and accountability of the gender equality mechanisms, and (ii) improve the regional coordination and monitoring around gender equality and inclusion commitments. With respect to the latter, we commit to enhance regional coordination to facilitate sustained regional coordination and monitoring and evaluation of equity and gender equality in access to economic opportunities.

We confirm that taking a regional approach to the gender and equity agenda aligns with ongoing efforts towards strengthening regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Under this approach, we will aim to address common challenges collectively, while facilitating specific individual reforms through peer-to-peer exchanges and accountability to mutually-agreed monitoring of and commitment to the reform agenda.