

Launching the joint RCC and UNDP initiative 'Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans'.

11 December 2020

Opening remarks of the Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*

- Equality between women and men has never been closer. And yet women's rights have never been under such a threat. As Simone de Beauvoir predicted: "Never forget that all it would take is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights will never be vested. You have to remain vigilant your whole life."
- Today more than ever our region needs skilful men and women to provide light and hope. I believe our societies get better if men and women cooperate equally for the common good, although we differ in cooperation. Cooperation is not antagonism, not even dissolution. It implies knowing how to balance.
- Western Balkans is not a rich region. Poverty entails fear, stress, humiliations and hardships. That's why we need the contribution of everybody to uplift our economies.
- I am really inspired to talk today at this event, not only because I relate strongly to the initiative that we are about to launch together with UNDP, not only because the topic has underlined my public and political life, but because I find it extremely important that this idea made even sceptics change their mind.
- There are many sides of women's empowerment agenda we can share and talk about. Some sides talk past each other. Feminism, men having more opportunities, stable families being those that follow the traditional model, children raised in broken homes learning less at school, technology running families, conceptions, misconceptions about gender, too many preaching in each society, telling women

how to breathe, live, function, talk, dress and so on. We know we have to deal with incredible pressure and toxic judgment too.

- I could only support what Mirjana said about the ***importance and right timing of this initiative which outlines targeted actions to improve the status of women*** and bring about a long needed and desired change.
- Empowering women economically is not a zero-sum game in which women win and men lose. No. It empowers societies.
- What we are trying to launch today is a platform which will allow us all to strategise on how to best ***contribute to unlocking women power in the region.***
- The reasons are obvious: Prior to pandemic, almost ***two-thirds of working-age women in the Western Balkans were either unemployed or outside the labour force.*** At around 45 percent, female labour force participation rate is, on average, around 7 percentage points lower than the EU average.
- During the pandemic, a ***large majority of working age women stayed inactive*** in the region.
- Loss of paid working hours affected more young women (18-34 years old), from 33% in Albania to 61% in Kosovo* .
- The proportion of self-employed who lost their jobs was higher for women than for men in Albania and Kosovo*, slightly higher for women compared to men in Bosnia and Herzegovina and lower for women than men in North Macedonia.
- Women ***were spending more time on at least one unpaid household chore in almost all WB6 economies.***
- The ***main challenges to gender inequality in the region persist:*** feminised poverty; insecurity in the labour market; a growing share of unpaid care work; wide gender pay and pension gaps; access to health; locking out women of leadership positions;

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

lower rate of female enrolment in STEM education compared to men due to pertinent gender stereotypes and gender discrimination.

- Not everything is grey, however. ***The participation of female researchers, for instance, is holding steady or increasing in the region.*** In most economies, women tend to be on par with men among tertiary graduates in science. ***Between 70% and 85% of graduates are women in health, less than 40% in agriculture and between 20% and 30% in engineering.***
- But the work is merely beginning. We have to start with raising women to the position of men because ***the cost of excluding women is high.***
- By boosting the participation of women in economy, we are also ***boosting the growth potential of our economies.*** If looking at the EU, by 2050, improving gender equality would lead to an increase in EU GDP per capita of 6.1-9.6%, which amounts to EUR 1.95-3.15 trillion.
- ***Closing gender gaps in the labour market and achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy*** are one of the key objectives of the ***EU Gender Equality Strategy by 2025, put forward by the European Commission.***
- Being an important part of EU strategic engagement within the framework of enlargement negotiations, where substantial attention has been placed to achieving gender equal society, efforts should be invested to enact a change in our societies.

How to unleash the economic potential of women in the region?

- We need to ***change attitudes away from male-dominated culture,*** to make it more receptive to women's contributions, be it in society in general, care economy, business or public sector.
- We need to ***make employment more attractive to women but also women more attractive to employers*** by addressing the skills gap through education, apprenticeships and later on work engagement.
- We need a whole-society approach to include all in this dialogue: ***governments*** to make policies more gender-friendly and to offer available childcare for everyone;

media to promote women and their accomplishments across a wide spectrum; *civil society organisations* to help connect women and men and build networks; *academia* to track trends and point out to pertinent challenges; and last – us, *regional and international organisations and donors* to forge strong partnerships by offering support and expertise, leveraging the untapped potential in the Western Balkans.

- ***Unlocking the potential of half the population is not just a moral obligation*** – it is an economic and security imperative.
- The benefits of greater inclusion are clear—not just for women, but for all of us.
- At a time when resources are limited, ***investing in women is a proven way to bolster good governance, economic growth, community health, and peace and stability.***
- The trend in recent years has been going into the direction of institutionalising gender equality and women’s empowerment as a foreign policy priority in the area of diplomacy, aid, defence and so forth.
- So let us pick up from here and make the most of the instruments we have at our disposal.
- One of such is certainly this initiative which will reinforce and advocate for a stronger women’s economic engagement as of next year, offering high-level interventions across various sectors.
- I will finish with the following: **Hire women, promote women and invest in women** - That is our future and our only future.