

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to The First Lady of the Republic of North Macedonia, Prof. Elizabeta Gjorgievska, for inviting to such a great conference! Let me also congratulate all participants for their contribution.

As you already mentioned, Albania has made some very good progress towards achieving bodily autonomy for women and girls.

Our National Strategy on Gender Equality (2021 – 2030) includes, for the first time, the specific objective of *empowering women and girls to achieve bodily autonomy*. Moreover, this objective, financially supported by the government, is harmonized with the Gender Action Plan III (Third) goal area of the European Union.

Also, regarding government policies on access to contraceptive supplies, family planning counselling and the provision of online information on contraception, Albania scores a high mark of 68.1% as shown in Contraception Policy Atlas Europe, 2023.

However, it is a kind of a paradox that in Albania during the period 2013 – 2023, the usage of modern contraceptives, has been declining from 11% to 4%, although the country's 400 health centres provide those for free.

I believe one of the main factors behind this situation is the *insufficient of sexual health education* due to the school dropout. So, according to the data of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the dropout rate of the elementary and secondary schools in Albania is 6.8% and 5.5% respectively. Moreover the sexual education classes are not compulsory as they are in countries with advanced bodily autonomy achievements.

Realizing bodily autonomy as well as the use of modern contraceptives by women and girls is also undermined by the *child and early marriages*.

I must say that this problem in Albania is much less severe today. So, during the period 1990 – 2008, 27.2% of the marriages involved girls under 18 years of age, whereas in 2020 that number was considerably reduced to 6.4% and in 2022 there was none. However, the rate of the marriages involving women just 19 years of age is still quite high.

I strongly believe that in order to achieve bodily autonomy, all of us, media included should do much more against taboos and stigma regarding sexual education and usage of contraception.

Let me mention that, under the Leadership of the UNFPA Albania, we are going to have very soon a detailed study about the main issues and factors affecting the bodily autonomy in Albania as well as the measures towards achieving bodily autonomy.

And obviously the discussions and conclusions of this Conference will help us enormously.

Thank you!