Achieving gender equality in the countries of the Western Balkans and in Turkey is a persistent challenge. The region has not reached the minimum 30 percent representation of women in decision-making; women’s entrepreneurship is on average below 10 percent; the gender pay gap is around 20 percent; and violence against women in the region is unacceptably high.1 Although accurate data on sexual and gender-based violence is sparse, the available statistics are alarming. For instance, in Serbia, recent research showed that 37.5% of women had experienced violence from a family member or intimate partner within the past 12 months, with 54.2% having experienced it at some point in their life.2 And in Albania, a staggering 59.4% of women have experienced domestic violence, while 53.7% were currently experiencing domestic violence at the time of the survey.3 Progress towards gender equality has been slow because of poor implementation of existing policies and commitments and lack of financial support to responsible institutions and agencies. A combination of structural gender inequality and cultural factors result in multiple forms of discrimination and continuously deprive women of their rights.

Critical regional priorities for gender equality include: increasing women’s participation in political and economic decision-making; establishment of inclusive and gender-responsive employment and labour market policies; promotion of economic opportunities for women, particularly in emerging areas such as green jobs and renewable energy; and elimination of violence against women.

To ensure the progress towards gender equality a close cooperation and concerted action of governments, parliaments and civil society is necessary. Effective implementation of policies also largely depends on the capacity of governments to co-ordinate the action of various agencies involved. To this end the European standards require governments to designate or establish official bodies responsible for the coordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of government policies and measures. These bodies play an important role in the implementation and monitoring of gender equality mechanisms and policies.

1 This is a finding of the European Parliament Committee for Gender Equality, and noted in the European Parliament Resolution of 21 May 2013 on women’s rights in the Balkan accession countries.
Since the 1990s, the European Union has been involved in a complex stabilization and progressive integration of the Western Balkans, declaring in 2003 that the future of the Balkans is in the European Union. The EU accession process is a pivotal opportunity to advocate more effectively for women’s rights and gender equality, with the European Parliament Resolution of 21 May 2013 addressing women’s rights in the Balkan accession countries (2012/2255(INI)), and the European Parliament’s Evaluation on Beijing + 20 highlighting a number of areas to be dealt with through more effective policy and implementation measures. These commitments have been reaffirmed by the European Commission in the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019.

Representatives of the European Parliament, the EU Delegation in Montenegro, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Institute for Gender Equality, national parliaments, governments and civil society from the Western Balkans gathered in Montenegro in November 2013 to reflect on the Report from MEP Marije Cornelissen and the European Parliament resolution gender equality based on this report. The meeting resulted in a strong consensus on intensifying regional cooperation and coordination on women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Western Balkans. Together with pre-accession requirements, this consensus provides impetus for joint action on policies within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has a stand-alone goal on gender equality (SDG 5) and a target of which is the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls. (SDG 5.2)

Against this background, UNDP has been approached by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to convene a meeting of Western Balkans countries and Turkey to intensify sub-regional cooperation for the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) and review progress achieved so far. This meeting will also be an opportunity to renew accession countries’ commitments to gender equality, especially in women’s political participation and gender equality in decision-making, which was one of the commitments made in Montenegro in 2013.

**Rationale**

The regional conference on gender equality in Western Balkans and Turkey will be an opportunity to take stock of implementation of gender equality standards including Istanbul Convention and role of national mechanism for gender equality to push this agenda forward. UNDP in collaboration with UN Women and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will bring together key actors in governments, parliaments, civil society and international organizations for a two-day exchange on the successes and challenges in fulfilling pre-accession gender equality standards.

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3 Implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights of the Government of Montenegro and with the financial support of the EU Delegation in Montenegro (February 2010-December 2014).
UNDP, UN Women and the Council of Europe, in collaboration with their partners, have supported the implementation of gender equality standards and mechanisms in the Western Balkans and Turkey. The strong partnership among these agencies will put UNDP and UN Women in a better position to support key national actors in the implementation of national gender equality standards. UNDP as the UN's lead development agency, with a strong gender mainstreaming mandate, and UN Women as the UN's gender entity, are committed to supporting governments, parliaments, civil society organizations and key national stakeholders in Western Balkan countries and Turkey respond to EU integration requirements on gender equality standards.

Together, UNDP, and UN Women and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will help generate the necessary support to launch a Regional Gender Equality Platform for the Western Balkans and Turkey to strengthen regional coordination and cooperation in the implementation of EU standards and mechanisms, including the Istanbul Convention.5

The organizing partners, in collaboration with governments and civil society representatives, will ensure that the Regional Gender Equality Platform is driven by national stakeholders and provide continuous support to ensure its sustainability and accountability.

The Government of Montenegro, UNDP, UN Women and the Council of Europe recognize the need for a range of national and regional actors to strengthen cooperation in the implementation of gender equality standards and mechanisms within the Western Balkans countries and Turkey.

In Montenegro, UNDP has been a longstanding and trusted partner to the Government, parliament, civil society and key national stakeholders to respond to EU integration requirements on gender equality standards. UNDP has provided support to strengthen capacity, improve mechanisms, advance policies and improve conditions for implementation of the National Action Plan for Gender Equality in the areas of women’s political participation, women’s entrepreneurship and violence in family. This has been done as part of Montenegro’s EU accession process, and therefore taken seriously by the political establishment and generating momentum for changes towards gender equality.

Conference objectives and expected outputs

Objectives:

The key objective is the creation of a Western Balkans Regional Gender Equality Platform for the Western Balkans and Turkey. The platform will emphasize that countries aspiring to fulfil the EU gender equality standards must respect equality between women and men, have institutions guaranteeing and protecting women's rights, and have strong supporting structures for the enforcement of the gender equality acquis and implementation of key legal instruments, in particular the Istanbul Convention, as well as gender equality targets as outlined in the SDGs and the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy.
On the first day, the participants will:

- Examine gender equality issues at national and regional levels, including the capacities of gender equality mechanisms and women in decision-making, to promote and implement gender mainstreaming in policies
- Identify areas for cooperation to enhance regional efforts towards gender equality and women’s empowerment

On the second day, the participants will:

- Discuss the challenges related with the implementation of the Istanbul Convention
- Identify actions for decision-making structures and responsible agencies to strengthen implementation of policies to eliminate violence against women and girls

**Expected outputs**

1) **Common declaration on joint efforts to promote gender equality**
   - Revitalized cooperation between national stakeholders to deliver more effectively on UN, EU and national gender equality and women’s empowerment obligations;
   - Synergies created between national and regional levels to strengthen democratic values, social justice, the rule of law, and the protection of rights of women;
   - Strengthened support for gender quality priorities to advance the SDGs
   - Identification of possible sources of financing for region-wide initiatives

2) **Strengthened political commitment for gender mainstreaming in policies**
   - Enhanced roles of women in decision-making (parliament, government entities, judiciary)
   - Enhanced dialogue between and men and women for gender-sensitive policy making
   - Identification of common goals for the Western Balkans and Turkey and joint actions for the promotion of gender equality

3) **Better understanding of the current status of victim protection and prevention of domestic violence**
   - Review of strategic initiatives and implementation mechanisms to achieve Istanbul Convention standards
Identification of action points to address gaps in service provision and ensure effective regional progress towards achieving the set goals outlined by the Istanbul Convention

**Participants**

- Representatives of gender equality mechanisms from the Western Balkans and Turkey (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey)
- Representatives of relevant institutions mandated for protection and prevention of violence against women (police, social welfare, lawyers, judiciary, health, education)
- Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- Members of parliaments and assemblies
- Civil society representatives
- Relevant UNDP, UN Women and other UN regional and Country Office representatives
- EU Commission and European Union Directorate representatives from the Western Balkans and Turkey
- Representatives of donor agencies