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ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN ALBANIA

A UN POSITION PAPER

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Compressed Version

Ending Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities in Albania

A UN Position Paper¹

Violence against women and girls with disabilities in Albania is a cause for serious concern, and it is amplified by pervasive social stigma and discrimination as well as inadequate legal protections and availability of support services for women and girls with disabilities. This paper describes the barriers that women with disabilities face, identifies legislative gaps to be addressed based on international law, and proposes concrete interventions so no one is left behind.

Globally, women and girls with disabilities are two to four times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than those without disabilities.² They are at particular risk of sexual violence, with 8 per cent of women with disabilities compared to 5 per cent of women without disabilities having suffered sexual violence in the last 12 months. During their lifetime, 13 per cent of women with disabilities compared to 10 per cent of women without disabilities experience sexual violence at least once.³ A survey in Southeast and Eastern Europe revealed that women with disabilities experience higher lifetime rates of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, with both partner and non-partner violence, as well as sexual harassment.⁴

Women with disabilities face multiple forms of violence. In addition to physical violence (such as bodily harm and withheld medical care), sexual violence (including rape and exploitation of their vulnerabilities), and sexual harassment, psychological and emotional violence are also common, involving threats, isolation and verbal abuse. Furthermore, economic violence restricts their access to financial resources, while violations of sexual and reproductive rights often result in coerced medical procedures. Obstetric violence, particularly during childbirth, and institutional violence in care facilities are also prevalent, with many experiencing neglect, abuse and forced institutionalization.

Violence against women and girls with disabilities in Albania

In Albania, stigma and stereotypes about women and girls with disabilities are deeply rooted in cultural norms.⁵ Disability is often seen as shameful, leading to social isolation and family pressure to hide or isolate women with disabilities to protect social standing. Gender roles further marginalize these women, as they are perceived as unable to fulfill traditional roles like caregiving. These stereotypes limit their opportunities for social interaction, education and employment, while also affecting the quality of health care and social services they receive, in turn perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency.

Women and girls with intellectual disabilities and mental health conditions are at particular risk. They often experience psychological and physical violence linked to caregiver dependency and societal

¹ The Paper was drafted by the UN Gender Thematic and Results Group (GTRG) with substantive inputs by Agustela Nini-Pavli, Gender and Human Rights Consultant, UN Women Albania, and Monika Kocaqi, Senior National Consultant for Gender mainstreaming and Ending Violence Against Women

² World Health Organization (WHO). 2023. [Disabilities](#).

³ United Nations (UN) 2024. The Disability and Development Report 2024, "Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities", <https://social.desa.un.org/publications/un-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development-2024>.

⁴ United Nations Population Fund. 2020. [Violence against women living with disabilities in South-East and Eastern Europe - UNFPA Evidence Brief based on OSCE-led Survey on the Well-being and Safety of Women in South-East Europe and Eastern Europe](#).

⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2015. [Profile of Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#); UNDP and Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF). 2015. [INVISIBLE VIOLENCE – An overview on violence against women and girls with disabilities in Albania](#); UN Women and ADRF. 2018. [Assessment report: Violence against women and girls from disadvantaged communities - an overview of the phenomenon of violence against women and girls from Roma, LGBT and women with disabilities in the municipalities of Elbasan, Vlorë, Tirana and Shkodra](#)

prejudice, further affecting their mental health. Common forms of abuse include withholding medication, home isolation and emotional threats like abandonment or institutionalization. Women with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities and mental health challenges are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, human trafficking, prostitution and begging. Psychological violence, driven by prejudice, leads to violations of their rights, while financial pressure often results in denial of access to their assets and benefits and an increased risk of institutionalization or abandonment.

Abuse can occur anywhere, in private and public spaces, within institutions and outside of institutions (home or workplace). Abusers are usually family members (including parents, siblings and grandparents), intimate partners or spouses, legal custodians, caregivers and health care service providers. Their physical, economic and social dependency further exacerbates women's vulnerability, decreasing their chances to seek help, access services or attempt to leave abusive situations.⁶

The link between disability and violence creates a damaging cycle. Women and girls with disabilities are often perceived as more vulnerable, making them targets for violence. This is particularly true when they are dependent on caregivers, which heightens power imbalances. Conversely, acts of violence can result in permanent injuries, leading to long-term disabilities, while trauma can cause mental health issues that impair daily functioning. This violence exacerbates social isolation, complicating help-seeking efforts. Additionally, barriers such as communication challenges and limited access to resources hinder the reporting of violence, while the stigma surrounding both disability and violence further marginalizes these individuals, perpetuating the cycle.

In Albania, women and girls with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing support services for victims of violence. Many service providers lack awareness and training, leading to inadequate responses and further isolation. Local social care support is fragmented, and members of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms lack the necessary skills to handle these cases. GREVIO⁷ highlights that services are often inaccessible, offer insufficient support for women with mental health issues and have no measures to ensure accessibility in courthouses or police stations.⁸

Several civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania advocate for the rights of women and persons with disabilities, offering legal support, promoting inclusive policies and providing accessible information on protection from violence. They also contribute to alternative reports on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁹ However, despite increased support for CSOs, GREVIO notes that bureaucratic barriers have limited these organizations' access to state funding, resulting in chronic underfunding of CSOs supporting women with disabilities, including those who are survivors of violence.

Effective policies to combat violence against women rely on robust data collection.¹⁰ However, in Albania, there is a lack of systematic data on women and girls with disabilities who are survivors of

⁶ UN Women & ADRF. 2018; INSTAT 2019. [National population-based survey: Violence against Women and Girls in Albania.](#)

⁷ GREVIO is the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the body of independent experts responsible for monitoring the implementation by the parties of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

⁸ GREVIO. 2024. [First thematic evaluation report: Building trust by delivering support, protection and justice – ALBANIA.](#)

⁹ i.e., Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF) in collaboration with Albanian National Association of Deaf Persons (ANAD), Albanian Labor Invalids Association (ALIA), Disabled Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association (DPQA), Defending the Rights of People with Disabilities (MEDPAK), Help the Life Association (HLA), Down Syndrome Albania (DSA), "Together" Foundation, Act Now Association (2019); Caritas Albania (2019); Albanian Blind Association (2019); "Together" Foundation in collaboration with DSA, ANAD, MEDPAK, HLA and Caritas Albania (2024). See: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=4. An extended list of CSOs, including those focused on women with disabilities, is available at [National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania.](#)

¹⁰ Council of Europe. 2011. [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.](#)

violence. This gap affects information on services, institutional responses, and protective measures, as highlighted by the 2019 CRPD report.¹¹

International legal framework related to violence against women with disabilities

Several international treaties address violence against women with disabilities, emphasizing the intersection of gender equality and disability rights. Human rights mechanisms have also developed detailed guidelines and recommendations to States on the implementation of relevant provisions.

These include the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and their treaty bodies (CRPD Committee and CEDAW Committee).¹² The CRPD Committee has adopted a [General Comment \(No.3\)](#) on women and girls with disabilities, which provides specific guidance to countries on relevant protection measures. Similarly, the CEDAW Committee has adopted [General Recommendation No. 18](#) on women with disabilities and [General Recommendation No. 35](#) addressing violence against women, including women with disabilities. Both Committees also receive individual complaints against States for violation of Conventions' provisions and have issued several decisions on violence against women with disabilities.

Despite human rights mechanisms having continuously recommended that Albania ratify the Optional Protocol of the UNCRPD, Albania is not a party to the Protocol, which would enable individuals or organizations of persons with disabilities to bring complaints against the Government for violating Convention articles. While Albania is party to the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW, no case against Albania has ever been brought to the CEDAW Committee.

The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention¹³ requires States to ensure that all measures for prevention, protection and services for victims of violence address the priorities of women with disabilities. In September 2024, GREVIO published its [thematic evaluation report on Albania](#), finding several gaps in protection and services for women with disabilities. Protection for these women is also provided by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) which has considered several relevant cases.¹⁴ To date, no cases against Albania related to violence against women with disabilities have been brought to the Court. Since Albania joined the Council of Europe in 1995, there has been only one case related to violence against women, generally.¹⁵ This despite a very rich case law developed with the contribution of women's rights organizations and lawyers across Europe. In any case, the Court' standards are binding on all members States and should guide Albanian authorities and CSOs working on the rights of persons with disabilities at the national levels.¹⁶

In 2024, the EU Directive to Combat Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was approved, recognizing that women with disabilities disproportionately experience violence and often have difficulty accessing protection and support measures. Member States should ensure that these

¹¹ See the Recommendations at <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/304/81/pdf/g1930481.pdf>.

¹² The Committee is a body of independent experts in charge of: a) interpreting the treaty provisions through General Comments on specific topics; b) reviewing States' progress periodically with regard to implementation of the Convention and issuing specific recommendations through Concluding Observations; and c) receiving individual complaints from individuals against States for violations of treaty provisions and asking States to provide remedies in case a decision on violation is taken. Under the third procedure, the Committee can accept only individual complaints against States which have recognized the competence of the committee to receive such complaints, through the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD and when domestic remedies have been exhausted.

¹³ Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence

¹⁴ Under article 2 – the right to life; article 3 – prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment; or article 8 – the right to respect for private and family life.

¹⁵ ECtHR. 2020. [Tërshana v. Albania \(Application No 48756/14\)](#).

¹⁶ See for example, *G.M. and Others v. the Republic of Moldova*, ECtHR (no. 44394/2015)

women benefit on an equal basis with others, while focusing on victims' vulnerability and the difficulty they likely have reaching out for help.¹⁷

In November 2024, the UN published its Flagship Report on Disability and Development, which calls for accessible public services, strong data collection systems, and inclusive policy frameworks. The report points out the need to have specially trained service providers and programs targeting the unique challenges that women and girls with disabilities are likely to face.¹⁸

National legislation and policies

In Albania, several legal and policy frameworks address violence against persons and women with disabilities. Specific protections are embedded within the broader legislation on gender-based violence and disability rights. Despite improvements, some of these provisions are not effectively implemented or contain gaps. Furthermore, there is a need to harmonize legislation and policies.¹⁹

The Law on Protection from Discrimination prohibits discrimination based on gender and disability grounds and offers protection for women with disabilities.²⁰ They have the right to submit complaints to the Commissioner against Discrimination and/or the Court. Yet, there is no consolidated practice on anti-discriminatory case law or sufficient interpretation of protection from discrimination in cases of women with disabilities who are victims of violence (for example, a woman who cannot access specialized services due to her impairment). This is partly due to limited awareness of the intersection of disability rights and gender-based discrimination among anti-discrimination bodies and CSOs.

The Law on Domestic Violence provides specific protection for persons with disabilities in line with the principle of reasonable accommodation. Secondary legislation²¹ contains some general requirements for accessible services, but specific regulations on accessibility are missing. GREVIO noted that there are no protocols or standard operating procedures in place when it comes to the treatment of women victims of domestic violence with mental health problems.²² This is the case also for women with other disabilities, such as physical, sensory or intellectual. The National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021-2030) ensures that measures to reduce all forms of violence also focus on women with disabilities. The Strategy aims to establish accessible services, but these commitments need to be followed by tangible steps and sustainable funding.²³

The Criminal Code criminalizes domestic violence and other gender-based crimes, which include offences against women with disabilities. It includes aggravating circumstances for certain offences committed against persons with disabilities (such as murder and human trafficking), which entail harsher penalties for perpetrators. A special provision also criminalizes sexual relations with persons with disabilities and taking advantage of the mental or physical impairment of the victims. However, this does not apply to other forms of gender-based violence against women with disabilities.

¹⁷ European Union. 2024. [Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence.](#)

¹⁸ United Nations (UN). 2024. The Disability and Development Report 2024, "Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities", which is an update of the 2018 edition of the same flagship report, produced in response to a request by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 75/154 of 23 December 2020, <https://social.desa.un.org/publications/un-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development-2024>

¹⁹ The analysis here is not meant to be exhaustive and address all aspects of gender-based violence and disability rights legislation. It only aims to bring attention to the need to initiate a more in-depth review of the legislation and policies in both disability rights and gender-based violence to ensure harmonization and effective implementation.

²⁰ Based on the recognition that violence against women is one of the most brutal manifestations of gender-based discrimination.

²¹ DCM No. 327, dated 2 June 2021, on the Coordinated Referral Mechanism for victims of domestic and gender-based violence, and the Order of Minister of Health and Social Protection No. 744, dated 15 November 2019, "Approving the minimum standards of social care services for victims/survivors of gender-based violence and domestic violence, in public and non-public (short-term) emergency residential centers (Emergency Shelters)."

²² GREVIO. 2024. [First thematic evaluation report: Building trust by delivering support, protection and justice – ALBANIA.](#)

²³ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, forced sterilization, which could particularly affect women with disabilities, is not defined as a criminal offence. The new Criminal Code, currently in the drafting process, is an opportunity to address these and other gaps. The Codes on Criminal Procedures and Civil Procedures also have a number of shortcomings, especially related to article 13 of the CRPD on procedural accommodation and accessible legal services for persons with disabilities. Overall, there is a lack of measures and protocols that remove barriers to access to justice and provide procedural accommodations in judicial proceedings for persons with disabilities.²⁴

The Law on Legal Aid enables women with disabilities to benefit from legal aid on the grounds of disability status, as victims of violence, or when faced with discrimination. The number of beneficiaries of primary legal aid is increasing, thanks to several Free Legal Aid Centres,²⁵ and some improvements have been noted in the provision of secondary legal aid.²⁶ Nevertheless, due to a lack of disaggregated data, it is unclear whether the demands of women with multiple vulnerabilities, such as women with disabilities who are victims of violence, have been met.

Legislation on the rights of persons with disabilities

Since the ratification of the CRPD in 2013, a legal and policy framework on disability rights has been adopted to ensure the treaty's implementation. However, this framework does not sufficiently consider the situation of women with disabilities, who often face discrimination because of their disability and gender. Additionally, links to legislation and policies on gender equality and gender-based violence are missing. For example, although the Law on Inclusion and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities provides general guarantees to ensure accessibility in all key areas of life, including social services, it does not make any specific references to the legislation on gender-based violence or specialized services for women with disabilities who are victims of violence. Similarly, the Law on Mental Health, which guarantees the protection of persons with mental health issues from violence from public officials/authorities²⁷ does not include provisions for protection against violence from private individuals (guardians, family members, private service providers, etc.). A lack of data on the situation of women with disabilities in Albania was also noted by the CRPD Committee in 2019, especially regarding the implementation of the National Action Plan on Disability 2016–2020.²⁸ Despite the Committee's specific recommendations, the following Action Plan on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2025) does not address intersecting forms of discrimination and gender-based violence that women with disabilities face.

Recommendations

Given the persisting and intersecting discrimination and violence that women and girls with disabilities in Albania face, urgent attention is needed by the legislative, central, and local government, the judiciary, national human rights institutions, public and private service providers, CSOs and the international community. Specific interventions may include:

Improvements and effective implementation of the legal and policy framework: Laws and policies addressing the rights of persons with disabilities and violence against women should be strengthened to specifically address the challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities. Harmonization among legislation is essential, along with robust monitoring and accountability for public officials regarding non-compliance. The intersection of gender and disability requires tailored approaches in policies

²⁴ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2019. [Concluding Observations on Albania](#).

²⁵ As of December 2023, there are 20 Free Legal Aid Centers managed by the Department of Free Legal Aid, 12 of which are supported by the State budget and 8 by UNDP and the Austrian Development Agency, See Annual report of the Free Legal Aid Department of Albania 2023 https://ndihmajuridike.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Analiza-e-Performances_Viti-2023-DNJF_NoCopy.pdf.

²⁶ A total of 982 persons benefited from secondary legal aid in 2022, out of 1,030 requests. 65% of requests were made by women.

²⁷ Based on the Criminal Code of Albania, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment are criminal offences committed or incited by someone exercising public duties.

²⁸ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2019. [Concluding Observations on Albania](#).

combating violence, ensuring that strategies address both gender-based and disability-related barriers simultaneously. Additionally, integrating recommendations from GREVIO, CRPD, CEDAW and other international bodies will ensure alignment with international standards.

Training of professionals: Provide specialized training for service providers and law enforcement on disability awareness, trauma-informed care and effective responses to gender-based violence. This training should promote inclusive and respectful service delivery. Additionally, targeted training should be provided for local CSOs working to enhance their advocacy for survivors of violence and improve essential service delivery.

Awareness raising: Launch nationwide campaigns organized by the Government and CSOs to promote awareness of the rights and needs of women with disabilities, highlighting the intersection of disability and gender-based violence. Accessible materials and inclusive language must be utilized to ensure the effective participation of women and girls with disabilities in these initiatives.

Financing: Allocate dedicated funding to organizations that provide services for women with disabilities, ensuring sustainable support for advocacy and intervention efforts. Prioritize funding for organizations led by women and girls with disabilities to amplify their voices and needs.

Women's rights and disability rights CSOs: Increase focus on issues related to the rights of women with disabilities and violence against women with disabilities, including the provision of adequate specialist support services, the organization of targeted advocacy and monitoring activities, and legal counselling at the national and international levels for women with disabilities.

Data collection: Establish a comprehensive system to collect disaggregated data by disability type on women and girls with disabilities who experience violence. This should include data on causes, risk factors, access to services, support services, implementation of protection orders, and free legal aid. Prioritize a streamlined data system that avoids overlap with existing frameworks, such as the local information system for registration of domestic violence ("REVALB"), and social care services, ensuring it is user-friendly and consistently updated. Collaborate with academic institutions and/or NGOs for better data accuracy. Regularly conduct surveys and research aligned with international standards, involving women with disabilities as respondents and data collectors to represent their perspectives.

Empowering women with disabilities: Promote stronger representation of women with disabilities in elected bodies, encourage their participation in decision-making processes related to violence against women, and support organizations that they lead to amplify their voices and perspectives. Foster their autonomy by enhancing their capacity to make informed decisions and advocate for their rights. Prioritize economic empowerment programs specifically designed for women with disabilities, encompassing vocational training and employment initiatives, to diminish dependency and alleviate vulnerabilities to economic violence and abuse.

Community involvement: Foster community engagement initiatives that promote the inclusion and support of women with disabilities. Encourage local participation in awareness and prevention efforts to create a more supportive environment, to challenge the stigma in society, and to establish support networks that can prevent violence and abuse. Develop and strengthen parents' and families' education, i.e., families' education, for example through initiatives focused on good parenting.

Promoting gender equality: Integrate gender equality initiatives into all relevant policies and programmes, specifically addressing the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities to foster an equitable society.

Availability of and access to support services: Develop and maintain a network of violence-specific support services for women with disabilities, ensuring that these services are holistic and adequately staffed and funded to meet diverse needs. Develop and structure emergency response services to address the unique requirements of women with disabilities, thereby guaranteeing their safety in times of crisis and facilitating access to prompt assistance.

Accessibility: Ensure that all public and private services addressing violence against women are fully accessible to women and girls with disabilities, both physically and digitally. Implement universal design principles to create inclusive environments and ensure that public spaces are equipped to meet their specific needs, thereby fostering safety and support for survivors. Uphold the principle of reasonable accommodation, whenever possible, to accommodate the needs of women with different impairments, including procedural accommodation in relation to access to justice for women with disabilities. Use technology to enhance accessibility for women with disabilities, creating accessible reporting mechanisms for cases of violence, and developing digital tools for education and raising awareness.

Social Employment Fund: Leverage the Social Employment Fund and similar projects to enhance social and labour inclusion for persons with disabilities. Focus on delivering existing and new models of employment and skills development services at the local level, with particular attention to the needs of women with disabilities.

Monitoring and evaluation: Establish appropriate mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of these recommendations and involve women with disabilities in the process of assessing the implementation and impact of laws and programs concerning violence and discrimination to ensure accountability and ongoing assessment of progress.