

Thank you Chair.

I'm speaking on behalf of Equinet, the European network of equality bodies, representing 46 equality bodies in 34 European countries and would like to draw your attention to the importance of a strong institutional and legal framework tackling discrimination.

Equality bodies are statutory public bodies set up by legislation in all EU countries and beyond. Their existence is based on EU equal treatment directives, obliging all EU countries to set up or designate such bodies to promote equality and fight discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnic origin and on sex.

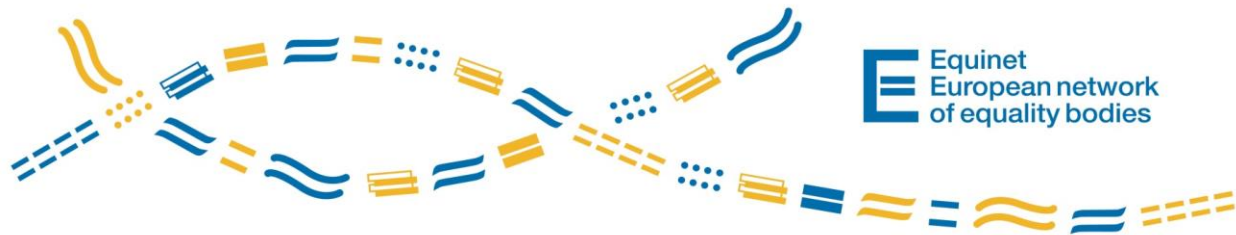
While there is currently no EU obligation to set up equality bodies on the ground of religion or belief, the majority of European countries went beyond the EU requirements and mandated their equality bodies to cover religion or belief as well.

Analyses of the potential and achievements of equality bodies show that if they are given the necessary mandate, independence and resources, they can be a highly effective tool in promoting equality and fighting discrimination on all grounds, including religion or belief.

Recommendations:

Therefore, it is suggested that OSCE Participating States that have not yet set up equality bodies consider doing so in order to contribute to better promotion and protection of the rights of religious communities and to tackle discrimination based on religion and belief.

OSCE Participating States that have already set up national equality bodies are requested to ensure that their mandate covers religion and belief in all fields of life and that there are sufficient guarantees of their independence and effectiveness,



including staff and financial resources, in line with standards set out by the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

The experience of equality bodies on the ground of religion and belief, collected in a number of [Equinet reports, most recently from 2017](#), provides a number of important learnings.

First, it is evident that religion and belief are highly debated and politicized topics in today's societies. States continue to grapple with the challenges of striking a balance between freedom of religion of an individual or a group against public safety, public order, health or morals, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others and 'living together'.

Recommendations:

Second, there is a need to further legal certainty as the case law on religion or belief of the two courts at the European level (the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights) and between different countries appear to be utterly contradictory on occasions.

Finally, it is of utmost importance that a strong and protective legal framework is in place and is consistently applied in all countries. Equinet's report underlines that even at the EU level there continues to be a gap in protection against discrimination on the ground of religion and belief, with only the field of employment and occupation covered, given the delay in adopting the so-called 'Horizontal Directive' proposed in 2008, that is, ten years ago.

Thank you very much for your attention.