The European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW) was established in 2006 to protect European Muslim women’s rights and promote their inclusion in our pluralistic societies. Representing over 17 grassroots Muslim women’s organisations across Europe, our aim as an umbrella body is to convey their concerns at the European level and advocate for positive change. The issue of the intersecting discrimination faced by Muslim women emerged as common theme in our work and a critical issue of concern for our member organisations. With the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and its various implications for Muslim women, we felt an urgent need to address the issues and propose solutions. This is the basis for our advocacy work on the issues of freedom of religion, gender equality and the protection of fundamental human rights.

We would like to draw attention to the restrictions placed on European Muslim women’s freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Specifically, the restrictions on Muslim women’s clothing and the multiple forms of discrimination this embodies. In advocating for Muslim women’s freedom of choice, we propose solutions that will help protect their fundamental rights in a pluralistic, democratic, Europe. The denial of Muslim women’s rights is taking place in the context of rising Islamophobia in Europe – a problem that disproportionately affects women who can easily be identified as Muslim. Many European countries have laws prohibiting religious clothing and Muslim women also face indirect pressures from political discourse, social expectations and the media. We would like to point out that Islamophobia for Muslim women in Europe is a complex mix of direct acts of violence, discrimination, social exclusion, media prejudice, structural sexism, and for those from an ethnic minority background, racism. Restrictions on religious dress are often justified within the framework of neutrality that applies to people of all faiths, but in reality they are directed only at Muslim women and form part of a wider discourse that claims Islam is incompatible with western values. Opinion polls in several European countries show that Muslim women wearing a headscarf are increasingly viewed as either oppressed or threatening. The stigmatising and stereotyping of Muslim women denies them a voice, ignores the diversity among them and fuels the kind of hatred that leads to harassment and violence. This is evidenced in the rising number of violent attacks on Muslim women who wear a headscarf, as well as their experience of discrimination at work and other spheres of life. Muslim women in Europe face a violation of their fundamental rights, with discrimination based on both their religion and gender. Numerous examples show that Muslim women bear the brunt of this intersectionality of discriminations in their daily lives, while also living in societies where gender-based discrimination is still a mainstream problem. However, uniquely for Muslim women, gender-based discrimination is often masked as an attempt to promote gender equality by claiming, for example, that veiled women cannot be free. These arguments deny Muslim women self-determination and rarely allow them to speak for themselves. In contemporary Europe, we are now faced with a situation where prejudice based on religion or gender is considered illegal but an exception is made for Muslim women. Politicians and feminists who would not consider it acceptable to interfere in any woman’s sartorial choices frequently make judgements about Muslim women’s dress. Far from speaking to Muslim women and hearing their views, politicians across Europe now interpret their choice of clothing as a symbol of oppression or political affiliation. This stereotyping of Muslim women somehow ‘justifies’ the denial of basic freedoms and human rights that are extended to the rest of the population. The generalisations made about Muslim women are sexist, Islamophobic and do more to restrict women’s freedom than the perceived structures they attempt to criticise. Freedom and equality are achieved in a pluralistic society when one social group respects the choices of another social group, however different they may be from their own. Unless this issue is tackled as a serious human rights violation, the stigmatisation and exclusion of Muslim women will continue to reinforce social divisions, increase isolation and create further tensions in Europe. This is the basis of EFOMW’s advocacy work on Muslim women’s rights in the hope of promoting a truly coherent, pluralistic Europe that extends the principles of freedom and equality to all its people, regardless of faith, gender or any other aspect of their identity.

EU and national authorities must take concrete steps to facilitate the collection and monitoring of data on multiple discrimination affecting women. EU and national institutions, as well as stakeholders such as the Fundamental rights Agency (FRA) and the European Institute for gender equality should include disaggregated data on gender, ethnicity and religion in studies, indicator frameworks and victimisation surveys. Encourage and initiate studies and reports that monitor discriminations on the grounds of religion and gender and specifically on the gendered aspect of islamophobia. EU and national institutions must perform qualitative and quantitative impact assessment of national laws restricting religious clothing since the first French legislation of 2004. The European Commission should initiate infringement proceedings on the basis of the Employment Directive (2000/78/EC) where there is systematic discrimination in employment on the ground of religion and belief. Consider launching infringement proceedings under the Gender Equality Directives, when systemic discrimination targets only women. The European Commission should launch infringement proceedings against Member States where there is evidence of failure to transpose or implement the Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia (2008/913/JHA), including on failure to investigate the racist motivation of Islamophobic crime against Muslim women and incitement to hatred against Muslim women. Member states should adopt national strategies to combat Islamophobia covering, among others, discrimination in employment and hate crime. Such strategies should include specific objectives and targets on Muslim women’s inclusion and protection from violence. Introduce provisions in anti-discrimination legislation to address multiple discrimination including on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and religion.

In summary, EFOMW is deeply concerned that the proclaimed gender equality in the EU is endangered by ever rampant discrimination based on religious beliefs. A cohesive, democratic and peaceful Europe has to be one that takes a firm position against any form of religious intolerance and gender inequality. The EU must take firm steps in raising awareness among its member states so that they feel equally concerned about the need to tackle the stigma and discrimination faced by Muslim women. This urgently requires a recognition of the intersectionality of discrimination they face, based on both religion and gender. The stigmatisation and exclusion of Muslim women will continue to reinforce social divisions, increase isolation and create further tensions in a Europe that desperately needs better social participation and engagement from all segments of society. A continent that prides itself on the rule of law being above all cannot continue to witness the open infringement of the fundamental rights of a section of its population. A truly coherent, pluralistic Europe needs to extend the principles of freedom and equality to all its people, regardless of their faith, gender or any other aspect of their identity.