**PRESS RELEASE**

**Equality bodies united: Champions in fight for equality need stronger standards**

***In order to be independent and effective as valuable catalysts for more equal societies, Equinet and national equality bodies call for European standards on the independence, effectiveness, functions and powers of equality bodies.***

The European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Moreover, the societies of the Member States are characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men. Equality and non-discrimination are central to the social aspirations of the European Union and are vital for the development of better societies for all. Yet, due to the challenges resulting from the economic and financial crises, and the more recent refugee crisis, intolerance, inequality and discrimination are growing[[1]](#footnote-1).

National equality bodies are public institutions set up throughout Europe to promote equality and tackle discrimination. They offer guidance in policy, employment and service provision that gives expression to the values of equality and non-discrimination. They are an important first point of contact for victims of discrimination and work towards the better implementation of EU equality legislation.

“*Equality bodies have a vital role to play in promoting and protecting fundamental rights*,” according to **Director of the** **European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights, Michael O’Flaherty**. “*For equality bodies to do their job, it is of the utmost importance to ensure they have a sufficiently broad mandate and enjoy financial and organisational independence. Only then do they have the power to actively work towards improving access to justice for victims of discrimination.*”

Despite the increasing need for equality champions, equality bodies are facing mounting challenges at national level: tough austerity measures have reduced the already limited resources of some; others face political pressure from their governments risking that they can no longer offer independent opinions on the state of equality in their countries.

No specific standards exist to ensure that equality bodies have the adequate powers and resources to effectively protect all victims of discrimination. In short, current EU legislation does not guarantee their complete independence, effectiveness, sufficient powers or adequate resources.

Equality bodies must have complete independence so that, without interference from any quarter and in accordance with their legal mandate, they can implement their powers as they deem most appropriate. They should be able to identify their own priorities and take positions on and respond to these issues as they see fit. They must have the powers and the human and financial resources necessary to deploy all their functions and powers, within their legal mandate, to a scale and in a manner that can achieve an impact and realise their full potential.

“*Equality bodies are key to combatting discrimination and ensuring the effective implementation of equal treatment legislation. For more inclusive societies throughout Europe, it is vital to have independent and effective equality bodies with the powers and resources to ensure that our rights to equality are applied on the ground and made accessible to all. The European Commission is determined to help strengthen equality bodies and create conditions in which they can reach their full potential”*, says **Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, Věra Jourová**.

In order to be independent and effective as valuable catalysts for more equal societies, Equinet and national equality bodies call for European standards on the independence, effectiveness, functions and powers of equality bodies. **Equinet Chair Evelyn Collins** highlights the need for strong European standards for national equality bodies: “*We need* *European standards for national equality bodies that ensure the potential of equality bodies to support the achievement of full equality in practice. They are needed to empower equality bodies with an authority and a standing that protects them from being undermined or diminished in the exercise of their functions*. *Strong European standards for national equality bodies will result in more equal societies for all.*”

The Equinet Working Paper on Developing Standards for Equality Bodies will be launched at a reception in Brussels on 15 June 2016. The specific challenge of creating the conditions for equality bodies to fulfil their potential will be discussed at a conference at the European Economic and Social Committee on 16 June. The experiences of equality bodies and other stakeholders with the implementation and possible shortcomings and gaps in EU equal treatment legislation will also be covered.

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**Notes**

* Equinet is the European Network of Equality Bodies, a membership organisation bringing together 45 equality bodies from 33 European countries including all EU Member States. Equinet promotes equality in Europe by supporting and enabling the work of national equality bodies. It supports equality bodies to be independent and effective as valuable catalysts for more equal societies. More: [www.equineteurope.org](http://www.equineteurope.org/)
* National equality bodies are public organisations assisting victims of discrimination, monitoring and reporting on discrimination issues, and promoting equality. They are legally required to do so in relation to one, some, or all of the grounds of discrimination covered by European Union (EU) law – gender, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and disability. See [Brochure](http://www.equineteurope.org/Equality-bodies-and-Equinet-promoting-equality-in-Europe" \t "_blank) for further details.
* Access the Equinet Working Paper on developing Standards for Equality Bodies [here](http://www.equineteurope.org/Equinet-Working-Paper-on-Developing-Standards-for-Equality-Bodies). This paper will be launched at a reception this evening, with the attendance of heads of equality bodies and high level EU stakeholders, notably Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, Věra Jourová. A one page summary of the working paper is available [here](http://www.equineteurope.org/IMG/pdf/visual_briefing_standards_for_equality_bodies.pdf).
* Further details on the 16 June conference ‘Strengthening the effectiveness of European Equal Treatment Legislation’ can be found [here](http://www.equineteurope.org/Strengthening-the-effectiveness-of-European-Equal-Treatment-Legislation).

1. The [Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2015](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/factsheet_eurobarometer_fundamental_rights_2015.pdf) shows that, compared with 2012, there has been an increase in the overall proportion who says they have experienced some form of discrimination or harassment (from 16% to 21%). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)