ADDRESSING ISLAMOPHOBIA:
A RESPONSE TO STRUCTURAL RACISM IN THE AFTERMATH OF COVID19 CRISIS

From European Network Against Racism (ENAR), European Network of Religion and Belief (ENORB), Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique (CCIB), Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France (CCIF), Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Migration & Development (EMCEMO), Asociación Musulmana por los Derechos Humanos (AMDEH), European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW), Fundación Al Fanar para el Conocimiento Árabe, Lallab, Association Il Razzismo è una brutta storia, Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO), Asociación Marroquí para la Integración de los Inmigrantes, Dokumentations- und Beratungsstelle rassistischer Angriffe e.V, Verein ZARA, Comunidad Islámica Mezquita Ishbilia, Organización Nacional para el Diálogo y la Participación (ONDA), Centre for Peace Studies, Associacio Chabab al Amal, Fundación de cultura islámica, La Red e.V.

The fight against Islamophobia in Europe as part of the Black Lives Matter movement

The sanitary crisis caused by the **outbreak of the COVID-19** in 2020 in Europe have exacerbated existing structural inequalities and will have a long-term effect on minorities in particular, including Muslims. As events unfolded in the US in recent weeks, the **Black Lives Matter movement** prompted protests and demands for racial justice and the end of police violence in the EU. The rise of Islamophobia in Europe, as a specific form of racism racialising Muslims, should be part of the wider discussion on how to address structural racism in the continent. **Strong and effective actions from the European Union institutions and Member States are needed in the different areas highlighted below**[1].

Muslims communities in Europe are very diverse and are at risk of racism due to their real or perceived Muslim or ethnic backgrounds (for example, Arab and Turkish descent individuals often automatically perceived as being Muslims). Islamophobia also targets Black people, Arab descent migrants, including asylum seekers, refugees and those who are undocumented, particularly those from North Africa and the Middle East.

Structural and racial discrimination in employment, housing and healthcare sectors. Muslims communities (or those perceived as such) were already facing racial inequalities and living under unsafe conditions. This pandemic has further aggravated the effects of the existing inequalities they experience. Muslims, and especially women, are often overexposed to the disease (and therefore to death) because they are disproportionately represented in essential but undervalued work areas, including cleaning, care and security sectors (with precarious working conditions). Socio-economic inequality in employment, housing and healthcare sectors due to racial discrimination have also been exacerbated. Recently, the Belgian constitutional court has allowed higher education institutions to forbid religious signs, this way excluding Muslim women wearing the headscarf from education.

Police abuse. To enforce the lockdown measures, Members States have increased their law enforcement efforts. However, minorities were already excessively targeted by racial profiling. This increase in policing has had a disproportionate and negative impact on Muslim men, as they are depicted as less obedient to the public policies and assumed to be suspicious and dangerous. The enforcement of the lockdown had brutal effects, compared to the more affluent areas within the same country, especially in a context of overcrowded housing conditions.

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[1] Based on civil society organisations' research and data collection

Islamophobic rhetoric and scapegoating. Within weeks of COVID19, hate speech holding Muslims minorities responsible for the crisis spread rapidly online. Some mainstream media have disseminated fear-mongering headlines and, in some cases, letting readers believe that the fasting period of Ramadan could exacerbate the outbreak of the virus[2]. Migrants were also depicted as potential risks and responsible for the sanitary crisis. In a context of mass of lockdowns across Europe, and closure of the borders, the opening of the border between Turkey and Greece has led to open hate speech in mass media[3], allowing waves of hate online.

Restrictions to freedom of religion and belief. While April counted several religious celebrations for different communities, in some countries, only Muslim population was specifically targeted by the public announcements to remain in their houses and to avoid gatherings. The existing lack of infrastructures has become an urgent and pressing issue since the outbreak, including the lack of Muslim burial spaces in cemeteries. Some analysts have also pointed towards the hypocritical nature of treatment of face covering in France whereby Muslim women can be fined for both covering their faces (165 EUR, by the way of niqab) as well as for uncovering their faces by the face masks (135 EUR). Conditions of life under COVID19 have reminded us that the way we interpret behaviors and customs is socially constructed[4] and COVID19 has indeed disrupted the interpretations of face covering.

13 public actions to address Islamophobia and protect Muslim communities in Europe

Crises are opportunities for policymakers to adjust their policies and meaningfully address racial issues, including islamophobia. The following recommendations for actions are key to adequately respond to the crisis and tackle the structural manifestations of Islamophobia by mainstreaming it in key policy areas. **As civil society organisations, we call on:**

European Institutions to
1. **Ensure that funding programmes** have specific allocation criteria to benefit Muslim people (or those perceived as such) and civil society organisations supporting them, so that they can develop long-term projects for victims' support, capacity building, strategic litigation, educational programmes, etc. This should be included in the current EU budget negotiations.
2. **Ensure that the new recovery instrument Next Generation EU** include measures that address the specific situation of Muslim communities and support civil society for both services and advocacy work, especially in the REACT-EU targeting the socio-economic impacts of the crisis, in line with the objectives of a rights-based, inclusive and fair recovery for all. The process for disbursement of funds should involve Muslim communities in consultative mechanisms with the governments.
3. **Explore the possibility to initiate infringement proceedings** based on the Employment Directive (2000/78/EC) to address the systemic discrimination faced by Muslim women wearing the headscarf in some EU Member States.
4. Assess the **restrictions of Freedom of Religion and Belief** in the upcoming revised Strategy on the Charter of Fundamental Rights and adopt recommendations for Member States. Civil society should be more involved in making it more accessible.

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[2]

https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/media-monitoring/item/619-hungary-origo-uses-coronavirus-crisis-to-stoke-anti-muslim-sentiment.html

[3]

https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/media-monitoring/item/596-greece-%E2%80%93-major-newspaper-uses-coronavirus-to-spread-anti-muslim-hate.html

[4] As stated by Marco Perolini, Amnesty International:
https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/25/requiring-face-masks-to-fight-covid-19-upholding-niqab-bans-shows-irony-lost-on-lead-view

5. **Assess and acknowledge the discriminatory impact of counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism measures** and ensure that counter-terrorism measures comply with fundamental rights safeguards, especially when implementing the recently adopted EU counter-terrorism Directive.

Member States to

6. Support the **adoption or improvement of national policies against racism**, such as **National Action Plans against Racism**, with specific measures or strategies to recognise and counter Islamophobia as a form of racism.

7. **Develop and promote harmonisation of data collection in areas of hate crime and equality**, including and systematically recognising anti-Muslim bias as a category. These data should be disaggregated by multiple grounds of discrimination (including gender, race, ethnicity and religion) while respecting self-identification and full anonymity. This is central to assess the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 on Muslims and design tailored responses and policies, particularly in the forthcoming recovery phase.

8. Adopt and implement **guidelines/measures to combat racism in law enforcement** (including to prohibit racial profiling, adopt more severe sanctions against police violence, increase racial diversity and trainings, establishment of independent oversight and complaint bodies that could investigate misconduct by the police, etc.).

9. Grant **resident permits to undocumented migrants**, to lift the barriers that prevent them from being protected and included in society.

10. Establish **firewalling protocols** to prevent the expulsion of undocumented migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, as well as facilitating their integration and access to health and other services.

11. Withdraw all financial and other forms of support by public bodies from political parties and other organisations that use hate speech or fail to sanction its use by their members and provide, while respecting the right to freedom of association.

The Fundamental Rights Agency and OSCE-ODIHR to

12. Support civil society in collecting **data and** carrying out **research specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on Muslim communities.**

13. **Monitor and include t**he specific issues targeting Muslim communities, including in the Annual Fundamental Rights report**.**