

National Equality Bodies : Champions of Equality and Non-Discrimination

WHAT ARE NATIONAL EQUALITY BODIES?

Equality Bodies are national, independent, publicly-funded institutions set up across Europe to promote equality and combat discrimination. They facilitate effective access to justice and play a fundamental role in the non-discrimination architecture of Europe.

Equality Bodies are **unique state institutions**, different from governmental offices, ministries for equality, or NGOs. However, Equality Bodies often cooperate closely with these organisations.

Equality Bodies are different from National Human Rights Institutions. In some countries, Equality Bodies also hold other mandates and may fulfill the role of National Human Rights Institution or Ombud institution. In such cases, Equality Bodies tend to have a distinct, specialized role and powers within the institution.

In all EU Member States and many countries in wider Europe, National Equality Bodies are set up based on an obligation in **two new EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies¹** and in EU **equal treatment legislation** (Race Equality Directive² and the Gender Equality Directives in employment, self-employment and access to goods and services³). They must cover at least the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, gender, age, disability, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. However, Equality Bodies in many countries have gone beyond these requirements and also work on other grounds, such as gender identity, health status, socio-economic status, and many more. In some countries, there is no fixed or closed list of discrimination grounds for Equality Bodies to work on.

WHAT DO EQUALITY BODIES DO?

Equality Bodies have expertise and powers that serve to promote more equal societies and prevent and fight discrimination. Among others, Equality Bodies may:

- **Take complaints**, free of charge, from anyone who experiences discrimination;
- **Provide free legal assistance** to those who experience discrimination, in many cases including taking cases to court or deciding the case in their administrative procedure;
- **Collect data** on equality;
- **Conduct research and issue reports** on equality in society;
- **Make recommendations** to policy makers and legislators;
- **Raise awareness** and communicate about equality and rights;
- **Engage** with employers, service providers, other public bodies, and civil society organisations to help them put in place good equality plans and practices.

DOES MY COUNTRY HAVE AN EQUALITY BODY?

All 27 EU Member States have at least one National Equality Body (most of which are members of Equinet). In addition, Equinet has member Equality Bodies in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo⁴, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom – non-EU countries that have accepted to harmonise their legislation with EU equality laws. National Equality Bodies that aren't members of Equinet may also exist in other European countries.

The majority of countries have one National Equality Body, but in some, there are two or three, with separate institutions to protect different discriminated groups (e.g. persons with disabilities or persons discriminated due to their gender). In some countries, National Equality Bodies are represented in different parts of the country with regional offices. In some instances, independent regional Equality Bodies exist at the sub-national level, for example in a "Land", province, or region. Such sub-national Equality Bodies are not members of Equinet, but in many countries, they cooperate with their national bodies in some form.

For a complete list of Equinet members, see the inside of this brochure, or find more information on the online European Directory of Equality Bodies: www.equineteurope.org/european-directory-of-equality-bodies/

¹ Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500

² Directive 2000/43/EC

³ Directives 2006/54, 2010/41, 2004/113

⁴ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO EQUALITY BODIES FACE?

Equality Bodies and other equality stakeholders have been working in an increasingly **challenging environment where social consensus on the value of equality is being defied**. An increasingly hostile political environment that feeds the polarisation on equality issues and generalised dis- and misinformation leads to the normalisation of discriminatory and hateful statements, policies, and actions that are in conflict with the founding values of European democratic societies.

→ Equality Bodies have already proven their **potential to promote equality and fight discrimination**, despite working in this difficult setting. In the face of such challenging environment, Equality Bodies have a crucial role and responsibility to remind Member States, institutions, and all Europeans that equality and non-discrimination are fundamental European values and, ultimately, hold to account those who violate equality and non-discrimination laws.

There have been **very diverse levels of institutional protection against discrimination across Europe**. Until 2024, EU Directives were limited to providing for the establishment of Equality Bodies and vesting them with a minimum set of functions. The Directives said very little about what guarantees, resources, and powers these institutions should have and how they should operate.

→ To fulfill their potential and maximise their impact, two Directives setting binding standards on the mandate, independence, resources, tasks and powers of Equality Bodies were adopted in May 2024. **The effective implementation and monitoring of these binding standards will be one of the common challenges for Equality Bodies in the coming years.**

Together for Equality, Stronger for All

IMPLEMENTING STRONG EUROPEAN STANDARDS FOR EQUALITY BODIES

Binding legislation on standards for Equality Bodies is a major step towards **better and more uniform implementation and enforcement of EU equal treatment legislation**, helping to fulfill its ultimate goal of **creating equal societies and eradicating discrimination**.

Effective and ambitious national implementation of the Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies can lead to Equality Bodies that have stronger guarantees for their independence and the necessary resources to promote equality, fight discrimination effectively and ensure accessibility to all. This will include assisting victims and ensuring better access to justice for all, with more adequate powers to achieve the objectives of full equality, and wider mandates to cover all manifestations of discrimination.



Together
for equality
Stronger
for all

While the Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies set minimum requirements for the effective and independent operation of Equality Bodies in a number of key areas, **Member States can and should go further**. They should be encouraged to strive for an ambitious transposition and an implementation strategy that leads to stronger and better-equipped Equality Bodies throughout Europe, and use the opportunity of adapting their legislation to identify improvements that ensure their citizens enjoy the highest levels of protection against discrimination. In this context, **stakeholders and allies at the national level can play a crucial role in advocating and supporting implementation strategies that realize Equality Bodies' full potential** by vesting them with the powers, mandates, independence, and resources required by these Directives.

Why are Standards for Equality Bodies important?



The implementation of these Directives will ensure that many of the current limitations on how Equality Bodies can promote equality, protect against discrimination, and provide access to justice are addressed:

- **Mandate:** This refers to the fields of life (e.g. employment or education), forms of discrimination, and grounds of discrimination (at the very least age, disability, gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation).

BECAUSE

in many countries, not all combinations of grounds, fields, and forms of discrimination are currently covered by the Equality Body's mandate (e.g. religious discrimination in housing or education may not be covered).

Member States can go beyond the requirements set by the Directives and extend the mandate of Equality Bodies to other grounds of discrimination (such as gender identity or health status) and to multiple and intersectional discrimination (on several grounds).

- **Powers:** This can include the power to investigate discrimination cases, issue opinions or binding decisions, legal powers to go to court, propose an alternative dispute resolution mechanism (such as conciliation or mediation) to the parties in a complaint procedure, but also powers to prevent discrimination and promote equality, for instance by collecting data or promoting positive action and equality mainstreaming.

BECAUSE

in many countries Equality Bodies do not possess all necessary powers, especially when it comes to legal powers.

Member States can go beyond the requirements set by the Directives and ensure Equality Bodies can carry out all the necessary powers to achieve equality.

- **Independence:** This refers to the legal requirement for Equality Bodies to operate with complete independence and without external influence, in particular as regards their legal structure, accountability, budget, staffing, and organisational matters.

BECAUSE

in many countries the independence of Equality Bodies is challenged by inappropriate political attacks on the Equality Body or its leadership, or by the lack of guarantees concerning appointments to leadership.

An ambitious implementation of the Directives by Member States can ensure Equality Bodies' full independence by enabling these institutions to be set up and operate independently from all government structures.

- **Resources:** This means that Equality Bodies should have the necessary human, financial, and technical resources to ensure their smooth and sustainable operation across their entire mandate.

BECAUSE

in many countries, Equality Bodies operate with an inadequately low budget and staff, they do not have proper premises and, in some cases, they suffer disproportionate budget cuts compared with other publicly funded institutions.

- **Accessibility:** This means that Equality Bodies' services and publications are free and easily accessible to all potential complainants and partners on an equal basis, including for persons with disabilities.

BECAUSE

in many countries public awareness about the existence and role of Equality Bodies is too low (often due to inadequate resources), their premises and services are not accessible to all, and they do not have regional and local offices.

- **Coordination and cooperation with other bodies:** This means, on one hand, that where there are multiple Equality Bodies in one country, they should develop close coordination and cooperation. On the other hand, this refers to the requirement for cooperation between Equality Bodies and relevant public and private stakeholders working in the field of equality and rights at local, regional, national, European, and international levels to be facilitated.

BECAUSE

in some countries such cooperation does not always happen, leading to missed opportunities in building stronger initiatives or systems to safeguard and advance protections against discrimination.

- **Consultation:** This means that governments and relevant public authorities should always consult Equality Bodies in a timely manner on legislation, policy, procedure, and programmes related to equality and non-discrimination.

BECAUSE

in many countries such consultation is not happening as a regular and efficient practice or it results in not having due regard to the Equality Body's recommendations.

How can I **work with and support** the work of Equality Bodies?

AS AN INDIVIDUAL, YOU CAN:

- Submit complaints to your National Equality Body, follow its work, and engage with it as a resource on non-discrimination issues.
- Spread the word about your country's Equality Body in your personal network.
- Raise awareness about the opportunity to enhance protection from discrimination in your country through the effective transposition of the EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies.

AS A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION, YOU CAN:

- Direct your members, partners, and clients to the Equality Body if they experience discrimination.
- Raise awareness about the Equality Body among your members, partners, and clients.
- Advocate for effective transposition of the EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies into national legislation and enhanced protection on all grounds of discrimination under EU legislation.
- Develop cooperation with the Equality Body on individual projects (e.g. a research project) or more generally.

AS AN EMPLOYER, SERVICE PROVIDER, OR PUBLIC INSTITUTION, YOU CAN:

- Ask the Equality Body for advice and guidance (for example, through the provision of training).
- Develop a project with the help of the Equality Body to put in place good equality practices in your organisation.
- Advocate for effective transposition of the EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies into your country's national legislation.

AS A POLICY-MAKER, YOU CAN:

- Advocate for and support the effective transposition and implementation of the legislation on binding standards covering the independence, effectiveness, functions, and powers of National Equality Bodies.
- Work to ensure the effective implementation of EU equal treatment Directives and enhanced protection on all grounds of discrimination under EU legislation.
- Request and consider recommendations from the Equality Body.



EQUINET, EUROPEAN NETWORK OF EQUALITY BODIES

With a membership of 47 National Equality Bodies from across Europe, Equinet, the **European Network of Equality Bodies** provides a **first point of contact for information relating to Equality Bodies at the European level**. We facilitate engagement with Equality Bodies across Europe and provide relevant information about their experience with various equality and non-discrimination topics.

Connect to Equinet: Read, use and disseminate our publications, attend our events, and follow our work via our newsletters, website, or social media channels.

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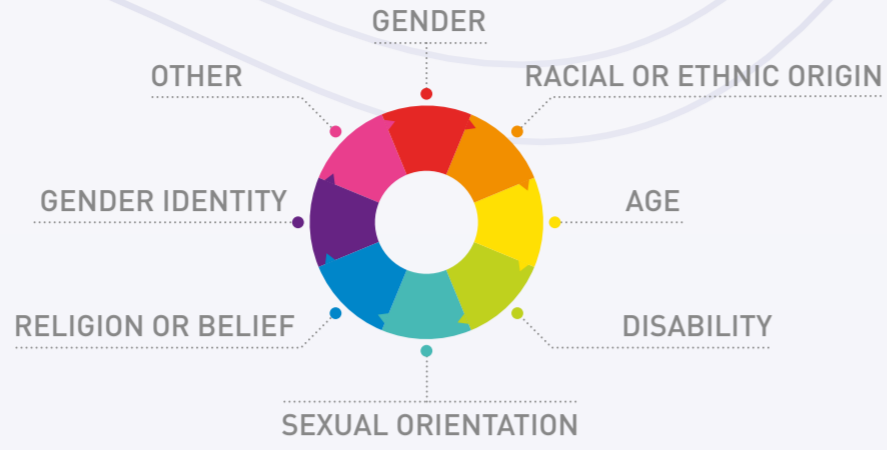
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Equinet Members and Grounds they cover*

* This is an overview of the grounds of discrimination covered by Equinet's member Equality Bodies in employment and beyond employment. In some cases, it is possible that the grounds illustrated here differ from those covered by the country's legislation.



	Employment	Beyond Employment		Employment	Beyond Employment	
ALBANIA			Commissioner for the Protection from Discrimination www.kmd.al			KOSOVO* Ombudsperson Institution https://oik-rks.org
AUSTRIA			Ombud for Equal Treatment www.gleichbehandlungsanwaltschaft.gv.at Austrian Disability Ombudswoman www.behindertenanwalt.gv.at			LATVIA Ombudsman's Office of the Republic of Latvia www.tiesibsargs.lv
BELGIUM			Institute for the Equality of Women and Men www.igvm-iefh.belgium.be Unia (Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities) www.unia.be			LITHUANIA Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson www.lygybe.lt
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA			The Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina www.ombudsmen.gov.ba			LUXEMBOURG Centre for Equal Treatment www.cet.lu
BULGARIA			Commission for Protection against Discrimination www.kzd-nondiscrimination.com			MALTA National Commission for the Promotion of Equality https://ncpe.gov.mt Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability www.crpod.org.mt
CROATIA			Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia - www.ombudsman.hr Gender Equality Ombudsperson - www.prs.hr Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities - www.posi.hr			MOLDOVA Equality Council www.egalitate.md
CYPRUS			Office of the Commissioner for Administration and the Protection of Human Rights www.ombudsman.gov.cy			MONTENEGRO Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms (Ombudsman) www.ombudsman.co.me
CZECH REPUBLIC			Public Defender of Rights www.ochrance.cz			NETHERLANDS Netherlands Institute for Human Rights www.mensenrechten.nl
DENMARK			Danish Institute for Human Rights www.humanrights.dk			NORTH MACEDONIA Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination www.kszd.mk
ESTONIA			Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner www.volinik.ee			NORWAY Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud www.ldo.no
FINLAND			Ombudsman for Equality www.tasa-arvo.fi Non-Discrimination Ombudsman www.yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu.fi/etusivu			POLAND Commissioner for Human Rights of the Republic of Poland https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl
FRANCE			Defender of Rights www.defenseurdesdroits.fr			PORTUGAL Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality www.cig.gov.pt Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment http://cite.gov.pt
GEORGIA			Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia www.ombudsman.ge			ROMANIA National Council for Combating Discrimination www.cncd.ro
GERMANY			Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency www.antidiskriminierungsstelle.de			SERBIA Commissioner for Protection of Equality www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs
GREECE			Greek Ombudsman www.synigoros.gr			SLOVAKIA Slovak National Centre for Human Rights www.snsfp.sk
HUNGARY			Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights www.ajbh.hu			SLOVENIA Advocate of the Principle of Equality www.zagovornik.si
IRELAND			Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission www.ihrec.ie			SPAIN Council for the Elimination of Ethnic or Racial Discrimination https://igualdadynodiscriminacion.igualdad.gob.es Institute of Women www.inmujeres.gob.es
ITALY			National Office against Racial Discrimination www.unar.it			SWEDEN Equality Ombudsman www.do.se
						UKRAINE Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights www.ombudsman.gov.ua
						UNITED KINGDOM Equality and Human Rights Commission www.equalityhumanrights.com Equality Commission for Northern Ireland www.equalityni.org

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