

Statement of Solidarity with Swiss Muslim Women

On 7th March 2021, while women all over the world prepared to celebrate International Women's Day the following day, Switzerland's right-wing Egerkingen Committee led the country to secure a referendum vote against Swiss Muslim women's right to wear the face veil. Switzerland becomes the eighth European country - after Germany, Austria, Denmark, France, Belgium, Latvia and Bulgaria and now also Sri Lanka - to ban the niqab.

Under the guise of integration, Muslim women are once again being used as political pawns to portray Islam as incompatible to European values and appeal to populist sentiments, which in turn secures votes for the right-wing party. Evidence suggests that fewer than forty Muslim women in Switzerland (out of a population of 8.5 million) choose to wear the niqab. **The minimal number of women the ban directly impacts underlines that the ban has little to do with the purported safety concerns but a clear attempt to publicly vilify the Muslim faith and cast Muslims as a threat.** Whilst exceptions have been accommodated on virtually all reasonable grounds, including health and security, it is religious practice that is criminalised. As such the ban serves to institutionalise, and legitimise Islamophobia. It reinforces the unequal treatment of Muslims and is the clearest announcement of the rampant Islamophobia and racism that is spreading across Europe.

We, the undersigned Muslim women from across Europe, issue this statement to:

- 1) *Express* solidarity with our fellow Muslim sisters in Switzerland - those who wear niqab and those who don't. We admire their courage and ability to remain steadfast in their religious convictions in the face of open hostility.
- 2) *Remind* Muslim communities across Europe that it is their duty to offer solidarity to the Muslim community in Switzerland. Europe's institutions, whether national or international, have been unable to provide adequate protections to religious minorities. Muslims must organise and build collective resilience in order to mount a challenge to the rising hate and Islamophobia that is sweeping across Europe.
- 3) *Advise* the Swiss people to stay on guard against political leaders and parties that exploit prejudices for short-term political gain. It is your responsibility to demand leadership that is fair and promotes mutual respect. Visibly Muslim women are easy targets for hate. The Swiss people must step up to the task of protecting all Swiss citizens and demanding equal treatment before the law.
- 4) *Warn* political leaders of Europe of the dangers of failing to lead responsibly - the spectre of fascism of the 1930's is still living memory for some. Popular sentiment can be manufactured. Democracy can be weaponized as others have done in the past. The 'tyranny of the majority' can have devastating long-term consequences. Leaders must heed the warnings from history.

5) *Call on* human rights organisations and those tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Rule of Law to act with urgency in holding public institutions to account. This trajectory must be halted and NGOs and international rights bodies have a particular duty to mobilise their resources in this regard.

As Muslim women of Europe, we stand in solidarity with our Swiss sisters and call on others to join us in the effort to fight back against Islamophobia.

Signatories:

Updated Signatories list:

1. Nakheel Women's Group (London)
2. Muslimaat Youth (London)
3. Sisters Network Project (London)
4. Sisters Forum (London)
5. Islamophobia Response Unit (London)
6. Nour Domestic Violence (London)
7. Khadija Leadership Network (New Zealand)
8. MEND (London)
9. Sister, Sister (Essex)
10. An Nisa Events CIC
11. Stepping Stones 2 Wisdom (Bradford)
12. AVOW
13. FOSIS (Sisters Wing)
14. ASR initiative (Sisters Wing)
15. CAGE
16. Na'ima B Robert (Author to many literature & editor of Sisters Magazine)
17. Martial Arts (London)
18. Ustadha Abeer Saddary (Teacher and founder of Quranic reflections)