

Justice for Women Launch of the High-level Group Report

Side Event to the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women
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Closing Remarks and Commitments

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It has been a great privilege and honor for IDLO to co-convene together with the World Bank and UN Women, this great group of women and men, who came together to shape a journey, a pathway to close the justice gap that women face.

All of us know that when you look at the most visible icon of justice, it is a woman's figure, a woman holding the scale in her hands and her eyes are blind folded. Justice is blind, but justice must not be gender blind. That is the key message that we are trying to put forward.

Our report comes at an exciting and inspiring time of increased activism by women and girls around the world. We see change happening in big and small ways, through legal reforms and judicial decisions, policy changes and collective action of women themselves.

But at the same time, our report comes at a very challenging moment of pushback and backlash. As we launch this report, I hope we will take a minute, or a second even, to remember the women activists and human rights defenders, who are right now in detention or on trial, simply because they demand equality and will not settle for anything less.

From women held without fair trial, to women toiling in their homes, in factories, in the fields, the gap between the justice women demand and need, and what they receive is enormous and that, of course, is well covered in the report.

When IDLO joined UN Women and the World Bank to convene this group, we did not do it to discuss the problems. We all know them, we hear about them over and over again.

We came together because it is time to accelerate action and enhance investment for transformative justice. The World Bank, UN Women and IDLO have very distinct mandates, as you know, but we have a shared goal on justice for women, and a shared understanding that the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda depends on closing this justice gap.

SDG5 on gender equality and SDG16 on peaceful, inclusive societies, access to justice and effective institutions are mutually reinforcing and together, they are critical for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. So, a lot depends on closing the gap in justice that women face.

As an organization that promotes access to justice through country-based programs, sometimes in the most dangerous, insecure, difficult, remote areas of the world, we look to concrete results. I focus on concrete results, because women look to justice very differently from men. Women don't look to see how efficient the process is, or whether it is formal or informal. What they are looking for are concrete outcomes in their lives.

Let me now move to commitments.

First, IDLO is committed to eliminating gender-discriminatory laws, and promoting the adoption of gender-responsive ones. We are also committed to ensuring that institutions are gender responsive as well. That is why we are very pleased to be a partner with UN Women in their strategy on Equality in Law for Women and Girls by 2030. Making institutions and laws work for women is part of IDLO's daily work. From Kenya to Tunisia, we are implementing constitutional and other legal reforms. As a rule of law organization, we know that the law is not the full answer to filling the gap in justice for women. The law is a guide for policy makers, for judicial decisions and it is a very important marker for social behavior and that is why we think, this should be our first commitment.

Second, we are committed to preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Sexual and gender-based violence forms the largest component of IDLO's gender program portfolio, from Afghanistan to Mongolia, from Honduras to Liberia.

Third, we commit ourselves to empowering women and girls as rights holders, focusing particularly on marginalized women and girls. As mentioned earlier, we work in some of the poorest, most deprived and insecure parts of the world. We are looking at diverse ways of reaching out to and empowering the most marginalized women, including some innovative ways of bringing legal empowerment together with social accountability – again taking a holistic approach to law and a holistic approach to justice. For women, the line between legal justice and social justice is a very fine one and we should never forget that.

Fourth, we are committed to promoting women's participation in the justice sector. Participation strengthens the agency of women as justice providers and it also strengthens the quality of justice that women receive. We found in our work that justice by women improves the justice that women receive. When there are women judges, women lawyers, and women court officials, women who seek justice themselves feel empowered and much more comfortable. At the same time, women justice professionals can also understand the experiences of women better. There have been ground-breaking decisions made by women judges like Navi Pillai and others, that have transformed the way in which criminal justice has been viewed for decades, even centuries, on issues such as rape.

Fifth, we commit to ensure justice for women through our engagement with customary and informal justice systems. The reality is that the majority of the world's poor including the majority of women in that group access justice through these systems, but when they do that though, they come across bias, prejudice, and many other barriers. Ignoring the informal or customary systems of justice is, therefore, short sighted. We need to engage with them. We have found from our programs on the ground and more than a decade of research that we have done in IDLO in this area, that there are opportunities, openings and entry points,

through which progressive change can come by empowering the justice seekers, including women justice seekers. Last month, IDLO opened a global consultation on the issue of customary and informal justice, which we will carry out in different parts of the world with various stakeholders. I would like to invite you to a side event that we are organizing here, on the sidelines of the Commission on the Status for Women, because we want to hear women's voices and make them a central part of our work to engage with these justice systems.

Finally, IDLO commits itself to advocate for the centrality of justice for women as an integral part of the 2030 Agenda. This is not in general, but in very specific terms.

IDLO will be co-organizing, together with the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs and the Government of Italy, a conference looking at progress on SDG 16. This conference, to be held in Rome in May this year, is part of the preparatory meetings that feeds into the High Level Political Forum. The High-Level Political Forum will take place this July in New York and its main role is to assess progress on the 2030 Agenda.

From our perspective, we will certainly make sure that justice for women is a central issue in the dialogue that will take place with governments and others in Rome, and that the Justice for Women report and its recommendations are fully integrated. We hope these will enable the discussion on justice for women at the High-Level Political Forum in July, and leading from that, also at the Quadrennial summit, that will take place at the 73rd session of UN General Assembly in September.

So there is a pathway at the global level, but there are also many pathways at local and national levels that we will follow through to make this report, not just a report on the desk, but a reality in the lives of women.

Technically, we are here to launch a report but really, I hope that we are here to seal an alliance, an alliance of individuals, groups and organizations that are fighting for the same cause. And I hope we will find many more men in that alliance, because we need men to work with women on this issue.

I also hope that we will find in that alliance, not just Ministers of Justice and Ministers for Women's Affairs, but also Ministers of Finance. We should have this conversation with Ministers of Finance, because that is where the difference will come, when the investment is made in justice for women.

Transformative justice for women may seem utopian, but it is within our reach, if we work together. Justice for women should never be a side note, a text box, an add on, it should be central to the agenda, because women are central to the achievement of sustainable development.

The International Development Law Organization (IDLO) enables governments and empowers people to reform laws and strengthen institutions to promote peace, justice, sustainable development and economic opportunity.