

# High-level Group on Justice for Women meets in The Hague

The inaugural meeting of the High-level Group on Justice for Women took place in The Hague from 28 – 29 May.

Convened by UN Women, the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#) and the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the High-level Group consists of justice, human rights and gender experts from governments, civil society organizations, academia and intergovernmental organizations.

Together, they will advocate for the prioritization of women's justice needs in the lead-up to the review of Sustainable Development Goal 16 during the High-level Political Forum in 2019, the UN's main platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The inaugural meeting of the High-level Group was opened by Sigrid Kaag, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation for the Netherlands and Co-Chair of the Task Force on Justice, who drew attention to the discrimination that perpetuates gender inequality in access to justice. "Access is an euphemism for describing a far larger problem: there is still structural and systematic exclusion of people from the justice system," she said, adding, "SDG 16 represents all the strands of international development, peace and security, and sustaining peace and women's access to justice plays a crucial part in this."

Currently, an estimated [4 billion](#) people are excluded from the rule of law, and [over 150 countries](#) have at least one law that discriminates against women.

Women's access to justice is critical for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The High-level Group seeks to highlight the specific justice gaps faced by women and girls, transformative approaches for improving their access to justice and the importance of scaling up investments.

Members of the High-level Group include: Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women; Abubacarr Marie Tambaou, Minister of Justice, The Gambia; Patricia Scotland, Secretary-General, the Commonwealth; Sandie Okoro, Senior Vice-President and General Counsel, World Bank Group; Irene Khan, Director-General, IDLO; Nathalie G. Drouin, Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General, Canada; Maria Fernanda Rodriguez,

Under-Secretary for Access to Justice, Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, Argentina; Dubravka Simonovic, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences; Hilary Gbedemah, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; Rangita da Silva, Associate Dean of International Affairs, University of Pennsylvania Law School; Catherine Harrington, Campaign Manager, Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights; Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, Head, Association of Indonesian Women for Justice; Frida Gómez, Director-General, Noticias Tiemposmodernos, and National Councilor for the Evaluation and Monitoring of Public Policies on Youth, Mexican Youth Institute; and Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, Director of Information, Communications and Media, Association for Women's Rights in Development.

At the inaugural meeting, participants called for justice and security sector institutions to uphold and enforce the rights of women and girls through bold gender-responsive measures in line with regional and international standards. “The normalization of impunity discourages women from seeking justice,” said UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. “In many cases, it is the courts themselves and the officials responsible for dispensing the law who are indifferent to the issues that we expect them to champion. This means that by the time a woman gets to be in front of the judge, she is already defeated, because of their attitude,” she added.

The importance of integrating women’s voices at all stages of the justice chain was also a central theme. “Equality and equal protection lie at the heart of the rule of law. Yet, all too often laws are gender blind and justice institutions themselves a source of gender inequality. Justice for women must not only be about punishing the perpetrator but about addressing the inequalities, systemic failures and institutional bias,” said Irene Khan, Director-General of IDLO. This was echoed by Abubacarr Marie Tambahou, Minister of Justice for The Gambia, who noted that, “Women have an inherent right to equality with men beyond the SDGs. Women's access to justice is connected to sustaining peace.”

Sandie Okoro, Senior Vice-President and General Counsel to the World Bank Group, emphasized the transformative potential of justice for women: “Access to justice for women is access to justice for all.”

Working closely with the Task Force on Justice within the Pathfinders initiative convened by the Governments of Brazil, Sierra Leone, the Netherlands and Switzerland, the High-level Group will prepare a high profile report on justice for women to influence the outcomes of relevant global and regional processes before, during and after the High-level Political Forum of 2019.

