

Keynote remarks by Louise Arbour

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French- American Foundation

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Thank you and congratulations

To Sebastien Jedor and to Jonathan Blitzer,

To the French-American Foundation for supporting this work.

For the first time in the history of the UN, in September of 2016 Member States have agreed to take on directly the subject of international migration. Perhaps even more surprisingly, in July of this year they have agreed on the text of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular migration. They will be convening in December in Marrakesh to formally adopt the Compact and launch its implementation.

It is not an exaggeration to state that this victory of multilateralism is surprising considering the political and public opinion climate that surrounds the issue of international migration in many parts of the world. And it is therefore particularly significant to celebrate the work of those, like the recipients of tonight's award, who have contributed to telling the complex and multifaceted story of human mobility in a serious, professional way.

This work is critical to ensuring that public policies are developed on the basis of a sound grasp of reality, on persuasive evidence and on relevant facts. In the field of migration, this is unfortunately not always the case.

Indeed, we have witnessed in the recent past an alarming growth in negative and inaccurate perceptions of migrants as burdens or threats in some countries, with these perceptions moving from the fringes to the mainstream, impacting dinner table conversations and turning national elections.

This mythology easily becomes self-perpetuating and very difficult to eradicate. Take, for example, the issues of women migrants: there are an estimated 258 million migrants globally, nearly half of whom are women. When the specific situation of women is addressed, it is often through the lenses of vulnerability and victimhood, which then dominates policy discussions.

But unless these discussions are balanced with a recognition, celebration and support for the increased influence and power that women have claimed for themselves, including women migrants, we risk inadvertently validating a stereotype. This does not require abandoning the denunciation of the discrimination inflicted on women on a daily basis, regardless of their status, migratory or otherwise. Quite the opposite. It requires fighting that discrimination head on.

Let's take a brief look at some aspects of the reality of women migrants. They often migrate autonomously, contrary to the popular assumption that they merely follow a husband or father. And they work.

ILO estimates that about 75% percent of all migrant domestic workers are women. Interestingly, labour market demands for highly skilled personnel, combined with improved access of young women to education, information and technology, has triggered higher flows of female migrants in the past years.

While women migrant workers typically earn less than their male counterparts, they send home a higher proportion of their income as remittances, putting money back into the hands of communities left behind.

Yet it is easy to inadvertently validate stereotypes.

For example, far too often, selected stories in the media combine women and children as belonging to one and the same “vulnerable group” in the migratory process. This of course obscures the fact that the vulnerabilities that women face are fundamentally different from those faced by children. Children are inherently vulnerable - to different degrees of course depending on a multiplicity of factors- but due to a fundamental characteristic, namely age, with consequent immaturity.

The vulnerabilities of women, in contrast, are contextual, not inherent, mostly attributable to discriminatory views and attitudes, social and cultural norms, inappropriate legislation and tolerated predatory practices that limit their participation in political and economic life.

This is as true in the context of migration as elsewhere.

We have a responsibility not to exacerbate prejudices and tensions with misleading information and biased terminology. Let me provide you with a few examples on the use of language. We often see the term “illegal” used to refer to migrants, which purport to refer to their legal status but is of course pejorative and serves to obscure the large variety of reasons for which a person may be in a situation of irregularity. It tends to inflate the seriousness of cause of the irregularity, suggesting some criminal activity, while in fact the irregular situation may simply arise from a violation of the terms and conditions of a visa. Similarly, disaster imagery to describe migration such as “swarms”, “invasions”, “floods” and “hordes” inevitably on tributes to polluting public opinion and eventually leads to insurmountable stereotyping.

I must add that the choice of words is not always inadvertent. For instance, in the context of armed conflict, the frequent reference to “innocent civilians” to describe the targets of an attack, suggests that “non-innocent” civilians would have been an acceptable target. Of course, the law of armed conflict contains no such permission as it distinguishes only between civilians and combatants.

Language and imagery are powerful political tools. In his report “Making migration work for all” earlier this year the Secretary General called for a need to change the narrative on migration, in order to bring public opinion closer to the positive overall reality of international migration. The economic impact of migration is indeed overwhelmingly positive.

The majority of migrants move in a well-regulated fashion, in accordance with national laws. They are productive men and women who work, pay taxes and spend 85 % of their income in the local economy. They sent back to their home country on average some 15% of their income in the form of

remittances. In total last year remittances to developing countries amounted to some 450 Billion US\$, 3 times the amount of official aid that richer countries send in development assistance.

Migrants constitute some 3.4% of the world's population but according to a recent McKensey report, they contribute some 9% of the global GDP, 3% more than they would have had they stayed in their home countries.

There are, of course, instances when international migration can have negative impacts, for example, when large inflows of migrants have short-term destabilizing effects on local labour markets not properly regulated, or when large numbers of skilled migrants leave a country for work elsewhere, creating labour gaps that may be difficult to fill.

But over the long-term the evidence is clear: the benefits of migration, particularly of well-managed migration, vastly outweigh the challenges. Migration brings added prosperity, innovation and progress, is a potent motor of development and, needless to say, a life changing experience for generations, migrants and host communities both.

Still two things come to mind. First, macro economic reality does not easily translate into digestible stories that can be made attractive to a general public. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the public debate about migration is not rooted in economic considerations, at least not entirely. It reflects more intangible uncertainties and apprehensions about the future, about the transformation of national identities and local cultural norms and the infiltration of unwelcomed values, attitudes and practices. Deep down, it also suggests an acceptance of inequalities and inequities, based on an unspoken belief that some of us are inherently more deserving than others.

I believe that we have a collective responsibility not to exacerbate prejudices and tensions with misleading information and biased terminology. And we need to be alert to not doing so inadvertently, rather than intentionally. This brings me to my last point. Among the widespread misinformation out there about migration, one of the most basic confusion is about the difference between migrants and refugees.

Although these terms are often used interchangeably by the general public, there are crucial distinctions between the terms "refugees" or "asylum seekers" and "migrants". Refugees are persons who have left their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict or generalized violence, and, who, as a result, require and are entitled to international protection under the widely ratified 1951 Refugee Convention.

While there is no formal legal definition of an international migrant, most experts agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status. It adds little to call migrants "economic migrants", which is often the case when attempting to distinguish them from refugees, but which has acquired a pejorative undertone. While most are seeking to make a living elsewhere, their decision to leave their country is based on a multiplicity of factors and often dictated more by necessity than by choice. This will increasingly be so for those affected by climate change, whether they experience intense natural disasters or the slow onset of desertification.

One concluding word. In navigating the complex legal and political environment in which the current migration debate takes place, journalists have both a unique opportunity and a professional responsibility to enlighten us all.

I am delighted to meet here tonight two that have admirably done so.

Thank you