

Family and Migration

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Transcription of Dr. Gallagher's video intervention at the panel discussion "...to a world which thirsts for Peace" during the General Assembly of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, Dakar, Senegal, 16 October 2018.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

As President of ICMC — the International Catholic Migration Commission — I am so very happy to be able to speak with you today. It is a great regret that I am not with you in person, but I send my thoughts and prayers for the success of your General Assembly.

As a Catholic woman and as the first female President of ICMC, I feel a great affinity with the work of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations. For more than a century, this body has performed a vital service: advancing the cause of justice and peace in the world; promoting the role of women in the Church and in international affairs. That work — and the voice you bring — is as important and as urgent in 2018 as it was in 1910.

The subject I am speaking about with you today — migration and the family — is close to my work and to my heart. But I'm sure that I am not alone. I'm sure that every person at this Assembly has been affected, one way or another by migration. Perhaps your experience has been a positive one. Perhaps you or a family member has migrated to work overseas and, by so doing, been able to improve the life and wellbeing of others. But we all know that migration can bring much disruption and heartache to families; that it can in fact, eat away at the bonds between spouses, between parents and children; between those who leave and those who are left behind.

But I do not want to get ahead of myself. Before addressing the specific issue of family and migration in detail, I think it is important for us to have a picture of what migration looks like in our modern world.

You are on the continent that, two million years ago, saw the first-ever mass migration of human beings. We cannot deny that migration is part of human experience, part of our humanity. And this is as true today as it has ever been. In 2018, there are more people on the move — and more people living outside their country of birth — than at any other time in human history. Many are moving for work or to join family members. Many migrants travel well, arrive safely and reap the promised rewards. It is important that we acknowledge the overwhelmingly positive experience of migration for most of those involved.

But too many of our brothers and sisters are not moving because they want to. Rather they are being forced to leave their homes, their communities, their countries because of conflict, violence and extreme poverty. Today, the number of refugees and internally displaced is edging up towards the unimaginable figures that were recorded after the last world war. There can be no doubt in my mind that the 'migration crisis' we hear of so often is very real.

And the 'crisis' is much more complex and much deeper than commonly portrayed. We know that migration is as much a part of globalization as the free flow of goods and capital. We

know that the global economy would grind to a halt without migrant workers. We know that many countries would be economically, culturally and spiritually poorer without their migrants.

We also know that current migration regimes are deeply unfair, benefiting only a very small proportion of those who want or need to move. These regimes put individuals, families and communities at great risk. They disempower — and too often criminalize — migrants; they rob workers and reward exploitation; they deprive millions of women, men and children of the most basic rights including the right to be recognized as a person before the law and the right not to be discriminated against.

These are our very public challenges. But there are other aspects to migration that are often hidden from view. They do not figure in big policy discussions. They are not the subject of agreements between countries. They do not get the attention and consideration they deserve. One of these is the impact of migration on families.

Migrants often move alone. There are many reasons for this. Often cost is a major factor. Families will commonly pool their resources to enable one member to move. We see this even in the case of refugees where a decision will be made to finance the smuggling of one family member to a place of safety, often in the hope that he (it is usually he) will be able to bring the rest of the family along at a later stage.

Migration policies in the destination countries also contribute to the splitting up of families. For example, many migrant workers, whether they are domestic servants from Indonesia going to Malaysia or construction workers from Bangladesh moving to the Middle East — are not permitted to bring spouses or children with them. It is their *labor* that is wanted, not their lives. In the Philippines, around nine million children are growing up without one of their parents because of migration.

And even where moving together *might* be possible, families often decide that for the good of all, some must go and some must stay.

We don't have very much information on the impact of migration on families. This is not a well-researched area. But there is no doubt that the effects are deep and profound. Of course, there are many benefits, and these should be acknowledged. Labor migration in particular, provided it is not overly exploitative, can bring economic security to families in a way that no other option available to them ever could. Remittances from migration can support children's education and give them access to health care. It can also provide the funds to support care of elderly relatives. Women can pursue opportunities for employment that might be inaccessible to them at home.

But there can be heavy costs. The migration of an economically active family member can, at least in the short-term, worsen a family's financial situation. When the migrant is the main caregiver, children and elderly relatives can suffer from their absence. Long-term separation of spouses causes hardship on all sides. Disrupted family life is almost inevitable.

And it is important that we not forget two other groups: families that travel together and unaccompanied children.

While families migrating together can support each other, theirs is not always an easy road. The challenges of integrating into new countries and new communities can fracture family

bonds. And the task of keeping the family unit together can be frustrated by inhumane migration policies and practices. Few will quickly forget the recent images from the United States of children being wrenched from their parents; of distressed migrants in cages awaiting deportation.

Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied children have migrated, often to very distant continents and countries. In some cases, this appears to be a response to policies that effectively grant the possibility of a better future to children who arrive without parents or guardians. In other cases, it is clear that the children involved have had no choice in their movement. Through war, conflict and poverty, they have been torn apart from their families. Either way, unaccompanied migrant children are at great risk: of exploitation and abuse; of detention; of unsupported and often risky deportation.

What can we do?

First and foremost, I believe that we must, as women, speak loudly and clearly in defense of the family in **in all discussions about migration**. The Holy Father reminds us that the sanctity of the family is not an abstract principle. Rather, in his words, "[the family is a good which society cannot do without, and it ought to be protected](#)"). And the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says very much the same thing: that the family, as the natural and fundamental unit of society, deserves protection and support.

This should be our starting point. We must work to **ensure that protection of the family becomes part of how we think about migration laws, policies and practices**. This means, for example, placing the issue of family reunification front and center, especially when we are talking about refugee resettlement.

And I believe that it is time that we start **questioning a global economic system that relies so heavily on the labor of separated spouses, parents and children**. How is that good? How is that serving anything that we know to be right and just?

Certainly, we should not unquestioningly accept **migration regimes that create perverse incentives** for families to separate, for children to be sent on dangerous journeys alone or in the company of those who are intent on exploiting them.

And in all we do, we must strive to live out our faith. This means both embodying and promoting the values that the Holy Father has identified as critical to confronting what he calls "the globalization of indifference". These are the values of justice, of solidarity and of compassion.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates: I am convinced that *your* mission — the mission of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations — is as important today as it was in 1910. Perhaps it is even more urgent.

This is a good time to recall the words of your founder who, more than a century ago, so bravely declared: *"Let us not dream! We have no time to do so; besides dreams are fatal: they waste our energy on imagining difficulties which may perhaps never materialize... Let us prepare for the future: to do so let us share serious and well-organized action..."*

Leaders and members of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations: *carriers of living water*, I urge you to fix your eyes on a future that can be much more than a dream.

I urge you to fix your eyes on a future that is achievable in our lifetime: a future where peace and justice, love and compassion, overcome our indifference, our fears and divisions. A future where we recognize each other as brothers and sisters, united in one human family.

Thank you. And may God bless you and your important work.
