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Side Event
Human rights perspectives on the governance of
migration at borders and in the context of returns
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Room XXIII, Palais des Nations

Written Remarks by Ms. Mariane Quintao

Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

My name is Mariane Quintao, and I am a former migrant child. Today I'd like to share with you my experiences, and hope to show you what migration governance looks like for millions of migrant children who leave their homes each year in search of a better life.

My story

I was born in Brazil to two loving, and committed parents. My father was a successful businessman, owning 3 small clothing stores, and employing seven workers. But in 1999, Brazil went through an economic depression and my father was having difficulty providing for our family. So when he received a job offer in the United States, like many immigrant fathers around the world, he was forced to leave our family behind in Brazil so that he could provide a better life for us. For 5 years, my father worked in the United States as a painter and searched for a way to bring my mother, my sister, and I to live with him.

After five years of our family being separated, and no real opportunities for family reunification, my mother and father made the difficult decision to move us to the United States so that we could be together, with or without the permission of the government.

My first year in the United States was very challenging as I struggled to learn the language. But I quickly made friends, went to primary school, learned English, and began to feel integrated into American society. As I grew into a teenager, I led a normal American life--I went to high school, was a babysitter in the afternoons, and enjoyed going to the movies with friends.

A year later, I was entering my senior year of High School. My friends and I were excited about our graduation and started looking at universities together and discussing what we wanted to do with our futures. I took field trips to college campuses, and decided I wanted to be a nutritionist, but on one specific field trip to Washington D.C., I was again asked—where my proof of legal status was. I didn't know that only legal residents could enroll in a university or seek scholarships. I thought, "Why shouldn't this be based upon my grades or my abilities? What does my immigration status have to do with getting an education?" Weeks before my high school graduation I watched as my friends received their college admission letters. I was supposed to feel happy, excited and hopeful about my future. Instead I began to feel lost and depressed.

Can you picture the image of a 17-year-old girl growing up in the United States, feeling as if she were an American, and yet unable to go to University or have a nice job? I started to worry about my future and my ability to be successful in life.

I decided I needed a break. So I took a trip with a friend and her aunt to Florida. We were going to visit Miami and enjoy the sun and the beach for a few days. But as we were driving to Miami, a black SUV pulled behind us with flashing lights. Two large men with guns and badges pulled us out of our car. I was confused, scared and crying. Then, they put me in the back of their vehicle and took me to an immigration detention center for adults. It was a large building that looked like a prison. There were barbed wire fences, and the officers all had guns and were wearing bullet proof vests. It was full of adults, and my friend (who was already 18) and I were separated. I was placed in a cell with nothing but a concrete bench, where for 1 full day officers took my picture, my finger prints, and asked me endless questions. I was given no food or water. No lawyer. I wasn't able to contact my parents for the whole first day.

I was then loaded into a large white van with many adult immigrant men, and taken to the airport where I was placed in a locked room. I spent a night at the airport alone in this room. I was very tired, but there was no

place to sleep. I felt cold and very hungry but there was neither heat, nor food. The guards treated me as if I were a criminal and told me I didn't belong in the United States.

From there, I was flown to New York and detained in a "Children's Village" together with children that had committed crimes or were suffering from drug addiction, abuse or were orphans. I struggled to understand why I was locked up, deprived of my family, friends and especially my freedom. I spent nearly a month in this place before I was finally given the option of either voluntarily returning to Brazil, or claiming, through a long process, that I was being trafficked or had been abandoned by my parents (which I wasn't).

So at the age of 17, I was returned to a country I could barely remember, and where my mother, father and younger sister no longer lived. This return was definitely not in my best interests, especially because it separated me from my family. Once in Brazil, I had lots of trouble adjusting. Portuguese was no longer my first language and I was surrounded by strangers everyday.

Recommendations

I think my story demonstrates how States are more concerned with protecting borders than protecting children or human rights. When families want better opportunities to work, to live together, to send their children to school, to contribute to society, they are often prohibited from doing so because of migration laws that simply make it impossible.

To end, I want to make 3 recommendations for States as they negotiate a Global Compact on Migration:

- First, the New York Declaration already contains a commitment by States to work to end the immigration detention of children. As a former child detainee, I can affirm that detention centers lack the proper infrastructure, access to services, and definitely don't feel like a safe place for children. My experience of being detained is one that I will never be able to forget. The Global Compact should contain a further roadmap for States to end the immigration detention of children immediately.
- Second, the Global Compact should guarantee that all children have the opportunity to build successful futures. For this to happen, there is an urgent need for children to have access not only to primary, but to secondary education as well. What point is there in providing migrant children the opportunity to go to school if, when they graduate, they will never have the opportunity to go to University and to later pursue a career?
- Lastly, the Global Compact must ensure that in any return decision, the best interest of the child is a primary consideration. In fact, even the word "return" does not accurately describe the impact that deportation, and "voluntary return", has on children. I was voluntarily returned, and can affirm that overwhelmingly, returns are a violent process of tearing children away from their homes, their families, their friends, and their communities. The constant threat of deportation and family separation are extremely damaging to children's mental health and development. States should prioritize child protection over increasing returns.

Conclusion

Thank you so much for attentively listening to me and for taking my speech seriously, in order to cooperate towards a better future for all Children on the Move.