Louise Arbour was born in Montreal in 1947. She received her B.A. in 1967 from the Collège Régina Assumpta and her LL.L. (with distinction) in 1970 from the Faculty of Law of the University of Montreal. She was called to the Quebec Bar in 1971 and to the Ontario Bar in 1977. After working as a law clerk to Justice Louis-Philippe Pigeon of the Supreme Court of Canada and as a research officer for the Law Reform Commission of Canada, Louise Arbour joined the faculty of Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, where she taught from 1974 to 1987. During that time, she published prolifically in English and French, focussing particularly on criminal procedure, human rights and civil rights. She served as Vice-President of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association from 1985 to 1987.

In 1987, Louise Arbour was appointed a judge of the Ontario Supreme Court, and three years later she was named to the Court of Appeal for Ontario. In 1995, the Government of Canada appointed her as Commissioner to conduct an inquiry into certain events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario.

After being appointed by the Security Council of the United Nations, Louise Arbour acted as Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda from October 1996 to September 1999. On September 15, 1999, her appointment to the Supreme Court of Canada took effect.

In addition to giving many presentations, seminars, lectures and speeches, Madam Justice Louise Arbour has co-authored a casebook and has written numerous articles, reviews and reports. She has received awards and distinctions in Canada and around the world, including more than 20 honorary degrees.