



Child Brides as Slave Labor: The UN Is Conflicted

by [Barbara Crossette](#) • November 3, 2014 • [Gender-Based Violence](#), [Human Rights](#), [Human Trafficking](#), [UN Agencies](#), [Women's Issues](#) •



Narmada, above, was able to avoid child marriage through the support of the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation, a nonprofit group in India that works to abolish child labor and ensure education for all children. It is a member of Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage. TOM SHORE/THE ELDERS

During the six years that [Gulnara Shahinian](#) served as the first United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, she said on numerous occasions, as well as in a 2012 report to the General Assembly, that girls forced to marry against their will end up being condemned to a life of servility and abuse.

“As with all forms of slavery, in order to tackle this problem head on, servile marriages should be criminalized,” Shahinian, an Armenian lawyer and expert on trafficking, said in a statement on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery in December 2012. “Nothing can justify these forms of slavery; not traditional, religious, cultural economic or even security considerations.”

Apart from child brides, victims of forced marriage include adult women in nonconsensual unions, wives sold or given away as payment of debts and women who are “inherited” by another member of a dead husband’s family. All are vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual abuse, life-threatening living conditions and infections such as HIV-AIDS. Many are forced into the basest forms of servitude and a brutal daily existence in homes they did not choose.

In recent years, the issue of child marriage has received growing attention in campaigns by many organizations, including [Girls Not Brides](#) and [Anti-Slavery International](#). This year, coincident with the end of Shahinian’s term as special rapporteur, [AIDS-Free World](#), an international advocacy organization that has moved significantly into women’s

rights as AIDS has become a women's disease in many places, challenged the [International Labor Organization](#), the oldest specialized agency of the UN, to explain why it refuses to recognize that child marriage is demonstrably child labor and forced labor.

The International Labor Organization, in a 2012 [report](#) titled "Hard to See, Harder to Count: Survey Guidelines to Estimate Forced Labor of Adults and Children," specifically ruled out child marriage as trafficking. But the convoluted reasoning raised only more questions.

The report said: "Human trafficking can also be regarded as forced labor, and these guidelines can be used to measure the full spectrum of human trafficking abuses or what some people call 'modern-day slavery.' The only exceptions to this are cases of trafficking for organ removal, forced marriage or adoption, *unless the latter practices result in forced labor.*" [Italics added.]



Guy Ryder, a Briton who is the director-general of the UN's International Labor Organization.

Yet 85 years ago, the organization, known as ILO, affirmed a link: The ILO Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (No. 29) defines forced or compulsory labor as "*all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.*" [ILO italics.]

These definitions continue to fall into the framework of employer-employee relations, not relationships within the home or family. When AIDS-Free World demanded an explanation, it found the response from the agency "confusing and shocking: the adult labor performed by child wives does not qualify for ILO protection because it takes place within the girls' own home," the advocacy group said.

"By refusing to categorize child marriage as child labor," the group added, "the ILO diminishes the intense impact of child marriages on girls — it is one horrific violation that triggers many others."

Perhaps the UN agency needs some updating based on emerging data — and changes in social attitudes, though a handful of reticent countries citing tradition can always stall progress in the UN. In the next decade, 14.2 million girls under 18 will be married each year — more than 140 million over the 10-year period, according to advocacy organizations, using figures from the United Nations Population Fund.

Complications from too-early pregnancies and childbirth are the leading causes of death for girls aged 15 to 19, and girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women between the ages of 20 to 24. Girls as young as 5 or 6 may also be victims of forced sex committed by much older men.

South Asia, with India far in the lead globally, has the largest number and highest rate of child marriages as a region; India is followed, in order, by West and Central Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa. East Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa and former Soviet-bloc countries fare the best, with Latin America and the Caribbean in between.

UN agency staff members in the field have seen many cases of forced domestic servitude and abuse of child brides. Nongovernmental groups have also heard terrible stories from girls who have been rescued.

"From the moment a girl is forced into marriage, her life is irreparably altered," AIDS-Free World said in its account of its interaction with the International Labor Organization. "That one decision, made by other people without her consent, permanently removes all of her fundamental rights as a child — to education, health, rest, leisure, play and recreation, protection from violence, and protection from performing any work that is likely to harm her physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. . . . They will be exploited by their societies; they should not be abandoned by the United Nations."