



GENEVA – "Women and girls who are forced to marry find themselves in servile marriages for the rest of their lives," warned United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. "They are deprived of their genuine right to make their own choice for their future."

"As if this is not bad enough these women and girls experience, sometimes daily, other human rights violations such as domestic servitude and sexual slavery, and suffer from violations to their right to health, education, non-discrimination and freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence," Ms. Shahinian stressed, quoting her 2012 report* to the UN General Assembly on servile marriages.

Non-consensual marriages, sale of wives and wife inheritance are forms of servile marriages which reduce a spouse to a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. The 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery clearly defines them as slavery practices, and international law has further reiterated and reinforced the provisions within the Convention that prohibit forced marriages in adults and children.

"Nothing can justify these forms of slavery; not traditional, religious, cultural, economic or even security considerations," the human rights expert underscored, noting that, over the years, the idea that forced marriages are forms of slavery and, therefore, servile marriages has been lost, while non-consensual marriages, sale of wives and wife inheritance still occur.

For the UN Special Rapporteur, reaffirming forced marriages as slavery-like practices "moves the discussion from being just about the rights of women and girls to also being about abolishing slavery within communities." In her view, it provides an understanding of the violations that victims endure and the kind of interventions required to prevent, monitor and

prosecute servile marriage, and helps tailor victim protection programmes to specifically support victims of servile marriages.

"As with all forms of slavery, in order to tackle this problem head on, servile marriages should be criminalized," Ms. Shahinian said. "However, it is important to note that an approach which only focuses on criminalization cannot succeed in effectively combating servile marriages."

Such legislation, the rights expert stressed, should go hand in hand with community programmes to help detect, provide advice, rehabilitation, education and shelter where necessary. Programmes and policies should also ensure the equal access to education for girls reinforced by mandatory measures to ensure that girls go to school. Public awareness raising campaigns should be implemented to highlight the nature and harm caused by forced and early marriages.

"Women and girls should not be forced to marry. Women and girls should not be forced to spend their life time in slavery. Nothing can justify that," Ms. Shahinian said.

(*) Gulnara Shahinian was appointed as the first Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, its causes and consequences in May 2008. She is a lawyer with extensive experience as an expert consultant for various UN, EU, Council of Europe, OSCE and government bodies on children's rights, gender, migration and trafficking. Ms Shahinian is also a former trustee of the UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary forms of Slavery. [Learn more...](#)

The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm>

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For media inquiries related to other UN independent experts: Xabier Celaya, UN Human Rights
– Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / xcelaya@ohchr.org)

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