

# Bride kidnapping: a cultural tradition leading to forced marriage in Kyrgyzstan

Bride kidnapping affects women's physical and mental well-being, and it is an integral part of the culture of some communities around the world, particularly affecting the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Even though Kyrgyz authorities have passed laws that denounce this practice and protect women's rights, in practice, women's voices remain unheard and disregarded by a system that turns a blind eye on the perpetrators' actions. Through the international community and some human rights organizations' pressure, slow but firm progress seems to be taking place.

**B**ride kidnapping, also called *Ala Kachuu*, which translates as "to take and run away, is when a girl or woman is abducted and forced into marriage. The effects of this act might include conjugal violation, undesired pregnancy, and the man's physical abuse against the woman"<sup>1</sup>.

This ancient practice is still affecting the Caucasus and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) nowadays. Even though other communities around the world also suffer from this damaging tradition, Kyrgyzstan is the one we will be focusing on. Kyrgyzstan, a Central Asian country of 6.5 million, is one of the world's epicenters of marriage by abduction<sup>2</sup>.

The procedure that is followed in bride kidnapping is the following: A typical bride kidnapping occurs

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<sup>1</sup> Hofmann, E and Guangqing, C. (2021, 20 September). *'Bride kidnapping' haunts rural Kyrgyzstan, causing young women to flee their homeland*. The Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September) *The world's epicentre of 'bride kidnapping': How one in three marriages is forced in rural Kyrgyzstan*. Independent IE.



Source: Tatyana Zelenskaya

in a public place. A group of young men gather around a woman that the perpetrator might not, but not well, or might not know her at all, and force her to enter a car. Then, the victim is taken to the groom's family home, where the women of the family persuade her into marrying the perpetrator. At this stage, some victims are rescued by their father or other male relatives. More often, though, having been kidnapped is a source of dishonor and instead than carrying this stigma in front of society and being labeled as a used woman, they end up accepting the marriage<sup>3</sup>.

UNICEF claims that 1/11 girls aged 15-19 in Kyrgyzstan is currently married. This organization is working in Kyrgyzstan and in other countries around the world to end child marriage. According

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem note 1

to Reuters, between 16 and 23 percent of women in Kyrgyzstan are abducted for marriage, but the rate is higher among ethnic Kyrgyz, 1/3 of all marriages are a result of kidnapping. We need to bear in mind that ethnic Kyrgyz make up 70 percent of the country's 6 million population which also includes Uzbeks, Russians and Turks<sup>4</sup>.

Most nations claim that bride kidnapping is a crime because of the implied element of rape, rather than a valid form of marriage. Actually, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) questions that bride kidnapping is part of a country's culture or tradition and considers it a human rights violation.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, L. (2021, 22 September). *One in five girls and women kidnapped for marriage in Kyrgyzstan: study*. Reuters.

The prevalence of this practice might be due to several causes: Normally, having a lower Human Development Index (HDI) affects many aspects of society, since economic, as well as social aspects, are included in it. Kyrgyzstan poorly performs in this aspect, “despite a process of successful poverty reduction, its current poverty rate is around 38 per cent, with 4,4 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty”. Paradoxically, the country seems to be committed to fighting for women’s rights. “Kyrgyzstan has ratified over 50 international covenants, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)”<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, however, the presence of big inequalities and regional disparities is remarkable. For example, women are largely excluded from decision-making. “Violence against women is widespread and takes many forms, including domestic violence, bride kidnapping, trafficking, early marriages and physical abuse”<sup>6</sup>.

Open Line has been fighting against abductions in Kyrgyzstan since 2009<sup>7</sup>. In 2012, the Parliament approved legislation toughening the penalty for the widely practiced custom of bride-kidnapping. The President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, gave the amendment to the Criminal Code and its official approval was in 2013. Once approved, “forcing women into marriage ranged up to 10

years. The offense was previously punishable by a maximum three-year prison term”<sup>8</sup>.

UN reports that, in recent years, “Kyrgyzstan has made significant advances in strengthening its laws, which has led to the prohibition to perform child religious marriages. However, more work is needed in preventing and prosecuting perpetrators, as well as ensuring the protection of victims.”<sup>9</sup>

According to an expert of Women Support Centre, the ineffective law enforcement and justice sector are the drivers of this interrupted advancement. She claims that “only one out of 700 cases are pursued by the justice sector” and “only one in 1,500 cases of abduction results in a judicial sentence in Kyrgyzstan.”

### **Society’s stance on bride kidnapping**

Society’s opinion about this practice differs and depends on several aspects. In the case of older generations, because it is deeply rooted in their society, they simply accept it, and it has been normalized. In general terms, they have a more traditional outlook on gender roles and women empowerment.

A woman who was interviewed stated the following: “It’s a very old custom,” a 60-year-old woman told us. “Even I was married that way, and I’m happy with my family life. My husband never beat me, and everything turned out well.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the fact that a part of the Kyrgyz population

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<sup>5</sup> Redaction. (2021, 21 September). *UN Women in Kyrgyzstan*. UN Women.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem note 4

<sup>7</sup> Aminova, D. (2021, 21 September). *Kyrgyz developers have created a video game to fight game-kidnapping*. The Calvert Journal.

<sup>8</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September). *New law in Kyrgyzstan toughens penalties for bridge kidnapping*. United Nations.

<sup>9</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September). *UN Statement on bride kidnapping and child marriage*. UN Women.

<sup>10</sup> Hofmann, E; Guangqing, C. (2021, 20 September). *Perspectives: Bride kidnapping haunts rural Kyrgyzstan, causing young women to flee*. Euroasianet.

does not seem very aware or has internalized the practice, does not help in advancing in favor of its ultimate abolishment.

On the other side, we see how some of the younger generations think differently. *“I am interested to learn more about the law. Because the law says we are equal. And I think, boys and girls, men and women should be equal. I am not afraid [of bride kidnapping] because now I know my rights. I know if someone kidnaps me, they are violating the law and I can appeal to the court.”*<sup>11</sup>

*It is important that girls know their rights. I want us all to be feminists and work together to stop violence against women and girls. What I learn in school, about rights, I share with my younger brother. He too should know his rights. I tell him that we have to take an absolute stand against violence.”*<sup>12</sup>

“Ms. Altybaeva and Kamilla, alongside a wide range of NGOs, activists, artists, sportsmen football federation, media and the private sector are actively participating at the UN Secretary-General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women Campaign in Kyrgyzstan, which is led by UN Women”<sup>13</sup>. However, more efforts need to be done.

Bride kidnapping might also derive in a high school dropout rate because they might become housewives from that moment onwards, so it has a clear impact on women’s education. Unfortunately, women are not consulted at any stage, which means that they are not able to give

their consent or disapproval regarding marriage<sup>14</sup>. *“25 years have passed since that nightmare happened to me. Being a victim of “Ala Kachuu” ruined my life. I can’t forgive all those people who took part in that crime, including my parents. It was not only physical violence, also psychological. I left that place [the house of the kidnappers] after 2 months, but I continued to experience violence for two more years... Most people consider it a tradition, but Ala Kachuu is a crime in which many people are involved. I am now an international trainer for a big global business programme; I help women to become financially independent and start their own businesses.”*<sup>15</sup>

This paper has demonstrated that bride kidnapping is a harmful tradition, which particularly affects women in Central Asia. It threatens their moral and physical well-being, and its consequences are everlasting. The physical effects of bride kidnapping might cause them undesired pregnancy and/or posterior health complications and it does not allow women choosing a partner for themselves. Psychologically speaking, women carry with themselves this painful trauma, and this might also have an impact on their interaction with other men and their self-esteem is severely affected.

Even though the international community’s effort, as well as some advances put forward by the Kyrgyz’s government have been remarkable, the way to go is still very long. During this path, however, women’s health continues in jeopardy. In this sense, UN agencies such as UN Women or the

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<sup>11</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September). *From where I stand: Aiturgan Djoldoshbekova and Aigul Alybaeva*. UN Women.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem note 9

<sup>13</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September). *New law in Kyrgyzstan toughens penalties for bride kidnapping*. United Nations.

<sup>14</sup> Redaction. (2021, 21 September). *Bride Kidnapping in the Kyrgyz Republic*. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

<sup>15</sup> Redaction. (2021, 20 September). *« I never said YES » - story of a bride kidnapping survivor*. UNICEF Europe and Central Asia.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) should exert even more pressure into local authorities to achieve a fast response and a stronger enforcement of the law.

Not only should some progress be occurring in the legal and institutional field, but also in society's mindset. It has been shown that people's stance on this matter differs according to generations or age group. For this reason, we should raise awareness among the younger generations about the harmful effects that such a practice has on women's health. This could be done by drafting more awareness campaigns and showcasing the short and long-term effects of bride kidnapping. To achieve this, a holistic transformation of society's stance on gender roles is necessary.

Another method that would be effective is shaming Kyrgyzstan's action/non-action towards fostering

gender equality. By exposing the practice of bride kidnapping at an international arena, the country might pass more binding laws and might take the issue more seriously. This practice should not be justified under the argument of "cultural diversity"; otherwise, women's physical and mental integrity will continue under threat.

All in all, we hope that through spreading education about the importance of women in society, making awareness campaigns about the harmful effects on women's health and the fact that it constitutes a violation of their rights, and strengthening law enforcement mechanisms within the country, more progress will be achieved in the following years.

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