



Struggle for Equality Amid Rise of Abduction for the Purpose of Forced Marriage in Post-Soviet Eurasia

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Abstract: Even in the 21st century, women are subject to extreme human rights abuses such as abduction for the purpose of marriage, which is still common in post-Soviet Eurasia. Better social education, political support and well-functioning legal systems are necessary to end this barbaric practice.

Women's rights can be fragile in many ways. Even before birth, female life is considered less valuable with the recent increase in [sex-selective abortions](#) in some patriarchal societies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Adolescent girls in these societies may have limited access to education and personal development, based on the rationale that it is harder to find a match for a highly-educated woman.

When women enter the job market, they may experience the gender pay gap or employers reluctant to hire them due to potential pregnancy (in most post-Soviet countries, employers must keep jobs open for mothers on maternity leave for three years). A newspaper survey in Ukraine found almost a third of women there had been [refused employment](#) at least once because they were or might become pregnant or had a small child. Yet some infringements of women's rights are more extreme than others.

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As a child, I spent summer holidays at my grandparent's house in a small town in the Russian part of the Northern Caucasus. I remember breathtaking views from the Elbrus mountain, my grandpa's delicious homemade *shashlick* (grilled meat) and the striking contrast to my home country (Ukraine) in the treatment of women.

My grandparents warned me about my make-up and clothes and forbade me to leave the house in the evening, regaling me with stories of girls kidnapped in the *auls* (mountain villages). As a teenager, I dismissed these as mere fairy tales to limit my freedom; only years later when I went to the Southern Caucasus to learn human rights in Yerevan and Tbilisi, I discovered how widespread this practice was in some parts of post-Soviet territory.

Abduction for the purpose of marriage in Kyrgyzstan and wider Caucasus

Abduction for the purpose of marriage, or [bride kidnapping](#)—abducting women who are then forced into marriage—has been practised in the Caucasian region, Central Asia and some parts of Africa. Since the start of the 21st century, Kyrgyzstan has gained notoriety as the world's 'bride kidnapping capital' following the publication of research papers and journalism investigations. Between 2014-2019, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kyrgyzstan registered [895 ala kachuu allegations](#), however, criminal proceedings were initiated in just 168 cases. Moreover, the real number of abductions could be higher as some cases (for example when a woman has accepted the forced marriage) may remain unreported. Earlier estimations show that around [a third of married women in Kyrgyz](#) have been abducted by their husbands; in rural areas, this number [climbs to 80 per cent](#).

This phenomenon of *ala kachuu* (literally 'grab and run') is often mistakenly considered an ancient tradition. However, anthropologists argue that the recent upsurge in abductions for the purpose of marriage is a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to economic impoverishment for many in the Caucasus and Central Asia and thus young men being unable to pay *kalym* (bride price) for a bride. *Ala kachuu* typically refers to the non-consensual abduction (*kyl ala kachuu*): however, it also may be used for a couple's elopement with further attempts to get approval from their parents. Each abduction is different but there is a typical pattern. A would-be groom and his male friends, generally drunk, target a woman, usually under 25, out on her own in her town or village. Sometimes the abductors know the woman, sometimes they are complete strangers. If they cannot find a particular woman, then they may just grab any unlucky woman they come across. [Petr Lom's 2004 documentary](#) 'Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan' depicts families wandering the streets looking for women they have previously earmarked to kidnap.

The abducted woman is taken to the intended groom's house where she is held captive, surrounded by her abductor's female relatives, who try to '[compel her to marriage](#)' by letting them put a scarf—the symbol of a married woman—on her

head. The victim's relatives also sometimes try to force her to 'accept' such a marriage to protect their family 'honour'. This is because after spending a night in the man's house, she is typically considered impure and even if she is not raped, her virginity is now in doubt.

According to the [Human Rights Watch report](#), the vast majority of women subject to abduction for the purpose of marriage are indigenous but foreigners sometimes suffer too. In 2007 a female US citizen who appeared local was kidnapped in Kyrgyzstan but later released once her citizenship became known. Norwegian writer Erika Fatland's travelogue '[Sovietistan](#)', tells the true story of Elena, a Russian born in Kyrgyzstan kidnapped while visiting her mother in a small village. Elena accompanied her female childhood friend Bubusara to the pharmacy but their male driver and his friends abducted both girls on route. Later, Elena discovered that Bubusara's parents knew about and facilitated the abduction. Elena pretended to be pregnant and managed to call her sister. Ultimately, Elena's family helped her escape but Bubusara was not so lucky, as not all kidnapped girls or women have families and friends able or willing to assist them.

Sometimes, the abducted bride's situation is so intolerable that she takes her own life. In 2011, Kyrgyz society was rocked by the tragic suicides of abduction victims Nurzat Kalykova and Venera Kasymalieva in the northern Issyk-Kul province, while in March 2021, [Aizada Kanatbekova](#), 27, was found dead in a car—her abductor is believed to have murdered her before killing himself.

Abduction in other Caucasian countries receives less media attention: however, activists and media have reported some cases in Georgia and in the Russian republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. In 2019, a [Georgian court sentenced two men](#) to 10 years in jail for abducting a woman in the small village of Tazakendi in the south of the country. In Dagestan, in 2020, [three males were detained](#) on suspicion of abducting a 22-year-old woman, whom they kept in an apartment for 24 hours trying to force her to agree to marry one of them. Police rescued her and arrested her abductors the next day.

Shifting mindsets

The problem of abduction with the purpose of forced marriage must be addressed in several different dimensions. First, strict legal punishment is needed. Until relatively recently, abduction with the purpose of marriage was not even considered a serious crime and the standard [fine](#) for stealing a sheep was higher than for stealing a woman or girl.

In 2013, the Kyrgyz state introduced stricter punishment with [up to 10 years of imprisonment](#) and bigger fines for bride abduction. Chechnyan president Ramzan Kadyrov multiplied the fine to 1m rubles and pledged a jail term of [up to 20 years](#) for abduction with the purpose of forced marriage. Ironically, human rights activists reported a drastic increase in [women's rights abuses](#) (including abduction with the purpose of forced marriage) under Kadyrov's regime. This

may be partly due to the fact that these stricter new penalties are still only weakly enforced. As we see from the statistics of the registered *ala kachuu* allegations, cases are rarely investigated, especially in rural areas where some police officers continue to view abduction for the purpose of forced marriage as a cultural tradition and might even [have been kidnappers themselves](#). In 2018, medical student Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy, 20, was stabbed to death in a Kyrgyz police station while filing a report on her abduction. Her murderer was jailed for 20 years and 20 police officers disciplined in connection with her death. However, the story repeated in April 2021. 27-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova disappeared and did not answer calls from April 5 onwards. Her mother filed a complaint with the police about her daughter's abduction, but the police officers laughed at her and did not start to search for Aizada. On April 7, both Aizada and her abductor were found dead in a car near Bishkek. The police inaction generated anger and led to rallies. 'If the [police receive a complaint about the abduction of a person](#), and they cannot do anything in two days, why do we need such a police at all?' asked human rights activist Rita Karasartova. Aizada's case points to the need for radical change to ensure that the new stricter penalties are implemented in practice, with the aim of improved deterrence.

Additionally, it is necessary to try to shift the public mindset and raise awareness about the consequences of this malpractice. Community workers must engage with both the younger generation (to strengthen a culture of real consent and healthy, equal spousal and family relationships), and with parents and older relatives to persuade them not to put pressure on kidnapped women and girls to marry but accept them back to their homes.

UNICEF-Kyrgyzstan set an excellent example with the release of a [short informational film 'Abduction'](#) (English subtitles available) in 2018, urging people to help abducted women and emphasising that just because something is considered a tradition does not mean it is right.