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# POLICY BRIEF

## #103

### **Breaking the Chains: Combating Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan**

by Nina Miholjic Ivkovic

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### Executive summary

Bride kidnapping (*Ala Kachuu* in the Kyrgyz language) is a deeply entrenched practice in Kyrgyzstan, often seen as a traditional or culturally acceptable custom. Although illegal under Kyrgyzstan's criminal code, the practice continues to impact a significant number of women and girls, frequently resulting in physical, emotional, and psychological harm to the kidnapped individuals. Bride kidnapping involves forcibly abducting a woman, usually with the intent of compelling her to marry the kidnapper. It presents substantial challenges to the country's legal, social, and cultural frameworks. This policy brief analyses the causes and consequences of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, examines the gaps in the existing legal and enforcement systems, assesses the cultural and socio-economic environment that permits such practices to persist, and offers actionable recommendations for combating this harmful phenomenon. With the improved engagement of local communities, strengthening of legal frameworks, adjustments to educational curricula, and increased awareness about this issue, Kyrgyzstan can move toward eradicating bride kidnapping and ensuring the protection of women's rights.

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## Ala Kachuu in Kyrgyzstan: Origins and Contemporary Situation

The practice of “(kyz) *ala kachuu*,” which translates to “grab (the girl) and run,” is a persistent practice in Kyrgyzstan that represents a serious violation of human rights and is a crime, stemming from the country's tumultuous history, inefficient legal frameworks, socio-economic challenges, and a distorted perception of national and ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup> UN Women defines bride kidnapping as the act of “taking a female without her consent for the purpose of forcing her to marry one of her captors.” UN Women further explains that “Perpetrators may use psychological coercion or physical force, including rape, to force the woman or girl into marriage. As with other forms of forced marriage, the key elements are: the taking of a woman or girl; an absence of her consent; for the purpose of marriage.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the negative implications of the act, particularly for the abducted individual, bride kidnapping remains a widely practiced method of contracting marriages in the country.

Studies on the origins of *ala kachuu* provide valuable insights, revealing that this practice was rare and mostly took the form of elopement in ancient and pre-Soviet times. Contrary to the widely held belief in Kyrgyzstan that non-consensual kidnapping was a part of Kyrgyz marriage tradition, frequently practiced with strong social approval in old times, research by Kleinbach and Salimjanova suggests that parents arranged most pre-Soviet marriages, and that bride kidnapping that

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Bagirova. “A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan,” *Trinity WGM Review*, (2021), retrieved March 10, 2025, from: <file:///C:/Users/Nina/Downloads/sbrennan.+3.+A+Crisis+of+Identity.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women. “Defining other forms of forced marriage: bride kidnapping,” *UN Women Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence against Women and Girls*, (January 28, 2011), retrieved March 10, 2025, from <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/622-defining-other-forms-of-forced-marriage-bride-kidnapping.html>.

aimed to circumvent such arrangements was in contrast to traditional customary law and thus socially unacceptable.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet period brought many dramatic changes to the Kyrgyz way of life, including the abandonment of the nomadic lifestyle, the introduction of marriages based on love, and the redefinition of gender roles. Forced collectivisation under communism compelled many people to accept new land property rights that were in stark contrast to previous nomadic ways of living. This intensified the process of sedentarisation which had started in the nineteenth century under the Russian Empire.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Soviet authorities imposed ideological and legal bans on all forms of non-consensual marriage (including arranged marriages and kidnapping), the payment of dowry, and early marriages, while promoting “love-based marriages” and gender equality.<sup>5</sup> Some argue that it is precisely these significant transitions that contributed to an increase in bride kidnapping even during Soviet times, particularly in rural areas experiencing poverty and unemployment. The Soviet-imposed lifestyle that emphasized education, especially for women, and intensified migration to urban areas left many young men frustrated, which may have paved the path for *ala kachuu* to arise as a predominantly non-consensual practice.<sup>6</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union left many post-Soviet republics to rebuild amidst a legal and socio-economic confusion. This was accompanied by a strong quest to revive historical and national identities. In some cases, this led to the resurfacing of “old customs,” often misinterpreted and too quickly accepted, such as *ala kachuu* in Kyrgyzstan. While bride kidnapping exists in other countries across the globe, the striking surge of this practice in Kyrgyzstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union makes the country an interesting case for exploring this phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of marriages based on non-consensual abduction, as in some instances the act of kidnapping might be merely ceremonial and not against a woman’s

<sup>3</sup> Russell Kleinbach and Lilly Salimjanova. “Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping and tradition in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 217-233, (2007), retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634930701517466>.

<sup>4</sup> Bagirova. “A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>5</sup> Kleinbach, et al. “Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping and tradition in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>6</sup> Bagirova. “A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>7</sup> Lin Zhao. “Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan,” *Department of Economics, Duke University*, (2017), retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://sites.duke.edu/djepapers/files/2017/12/linzhao-dje-kidnapping.pdf>.

wishes, few studies conducted by researchers and NGOs suggest that *ala kachuu*, in its negative form, has become widespread in the post-Soviet period.<sup>8</sup> For instance, research from 2015 indicates that one-third of Kyrgyz marriages involve bride kidnapping and that half of these are non-consensual.<sup>9</sup> The most recent available data indicates that between 7,000 and 9,000 Kyrgyz women and girls are abducted for marriage annually.<sup>10</sup>

The surge in *ala kachuu* can thus be attributed to the de-Sovietization process and socio-economic degradation, particularly in rural Kyrgyzstan, as well as, to some extent, the revival of religious beliefs. Bride kidnapping has gained popularity since Kyrgyzstan declared independence in 1991, mainly due to its perception as an aspect of Kyrgyz cultural identity that was suppressed under Soviet rule.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in an economically challenged country that has struggled with increased poverty and unemployment, combined with the reintroduction of traditional and patriarchal values that reversed much of the progress made in the field of women's empowerment through education and official employment, bride kidnapping has become a convenient tool for avoiding costly wedding ceremonies<sup>12</sup> and suppressing women's aspirations to obtain an education and build a career.<sup>13</sup>

Another important social trend that may have indirectly contributed to an increase in *ala kachuu* in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is the restoration of Islamic beliefs and customs. While bride kidnapping has no basis in the Islamic faith, and the even more conservative Uzbeks and Tajiks do not tolerate abduction,<sup>14</sup> Islamic values have allusively played a role in pressuring kidnapped brides to stay with their abductors. In Islam,

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<sup>8</sup> "Bride-kidnapping," *Human Rights Watch*, (2006), retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/kyrgyzstan0906/3.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Lesia Nedoluzhko and Victor Agadjanian. "Between Tradition and Modernity: Marriage Dynamics in Kyrgyzstan," *Demography*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (June 2015), p. 868, retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43699165>.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Chambers. "Women's Rights in Kyrgyzstan," The Borgen Project, (March 28, 2023), retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

<sup>11</sup> Lori Handrahan. "International Human Rights Law and Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan," Eurasianet, (January 27, 2000), retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20160617072620/http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav012400.shtml>.

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Werner. "Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 2009), p. 326, retrieved March 15, 2025, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20527710>.

<sup>13</sup> Bagirova. "A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>14</sup> "Examining the Societal Implications of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan," unpublished M.A. thesis, OSCE Academy, 2025, p. 15.

symbols of purity and innocence (such as virginity) are highly respected, which often forces unwilling brides to accept their new circumstances. Typically, a kidnapped bride will spend the night at her abductor's home, which, as an indicator of intimacy, is followed by shame and pressure to accept the marriage proposal.<sup>15</sup>

## Cultural and Socio-Economic Restraints

After gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan embarked on a nation-building process that reintroduced patriarchal and traditional values, as well as ethnic identities, often based on misinterpreted ancient myths and customs. Cultural norms stemming from this process have frequently resulted in the suppression of women's and girls' rights and freedoms. Women are more often encouraged to become wives, bear children, and obey their husbands and in-laws, rather than pursue education or careers. Bride kidnapping degrades women, reducing them to the status of property and voiceless objects who are expected to accept and even celebrate the act of abduction, which is seen as proof of their value as desirable and worthy.<sup>16</sup>

Bride kidnapping typically happens in public, where a group of men forcibly takes a young woman, often someone the groom barely knows, into a waiting car. She is then brought to the groom's family home, where family members try to convince her to agree to the marriage. While relatives rescue some victims, many, fearing the shame of being seen as a "used" woman, agree to marry. In some cases, physical violence or rape is used to force consent, though this is not always the norm.<sup>17</sup> The immense cultural pressure plays a significant role in the persistence of this traumatic practice for kidnapped women.

The older generation in Kyrgyzstan does not view *ala kachuu* as wrong, but rather as a "harmless tradition."<sup>18</sup> On a positive note, most people under 50 have started to reject *ala kachuu*, especially when the couples

<sup>15</sup> Bagirova. "A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>16</sup> Bagirova. "A Crisis of Identity: The Rise of Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>17</sup> Lucía Caballero. "'Bride kidnapping' haunts rural Kyrgyzstan, causing young women to flee their homeland," The Conversation, (June 7, 2021), retrieved March 17, 2025, from <https://theconversation.com/bride-kidnapping-haunts-rural-kyrgyzstan-causing-young-women-to-flee-their-homeland-158404>.

<sup>18</sup> Lucía Caballero. "'Bride kidnapping' haunts rural Kyrgyzstan, causing young women to flee their homeland."

are complete strangers. However, they are still unaware of the scope and consequences of the abduction, as they believe that bride kidnapping is an obsolete practice that today takes the form only of “pretend” or “staged” kidnappings.<sup>19</sup> Although non-consensual kidnappings are perceived highly negatively by both women and men, both in urban and rural areas, there is a slightly higher percentage of negative views among women in urban areas.<sup>20</sup> Despite this, the practice continues to persist, especially in rural Kyrgyzstan. Marriages through the abduction of women without their consent are observed across the country at an average rate of 4 percent in urban areas and 7 percent in rural areas, ranging from as low as 2 percent in Bishkek to as high as 21 percent in the Naryn region.<sup>21</sup>

The country's socio-economic challenges, most prominent in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution but continuing to the present day, albeit with some improvements, have left the majority of Kyrgyz citizens struggling. These challenges have particularly impacted women, who have become less financially independent and have fewer educational opportunities. According to a World Development Report, during the first decade of independence, the economic activity of women of working age decreased from 81.6 percent to 42.3 percent, with even greater declines in some regions.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, the female unemployment rate was 1.3 times higher than the male rate, with rural women facing twice the unemployment rate of urban women, and 27.3 percent of young women neither working nor studying.<sup>23</sup> According to the UNFPA study, the majority of abducted women come from the poorest households and have either only a primary education or no education at all.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lucía Caballero. “‘Bride kidnapping’ haunts rural Kyrgyzstan, causing young women to flee their homeland.”

<sup>20</sup> “Gender in Perception of Society (National Survey Results).” *UNFPA*, (2016), retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://kyrgyzstan.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-society-perception-study>.

<sup>21</sup> “Gender in Perception of Society (National Survey Results).” *UNFPA*.

<sup>22</sup> Guzali Abdirazakova. “Kyrgyzstan: Gender Analysis for GIZ Programme Mineral Resources for Development,” (2014), retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://gender-works.giz.de/competitions/kyrgyzstan-gender-analysis-for-giz-programme-mineral-resources-for-development/>.

<sup>23</sup> “GENDER SNAPSHOT: Women's economic activity: What is the situation in Kyrgyzstan?” *UN Women*, (2021), retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/2023/Kyrgyzstan-women-economics.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> “Gender in Perception of Society (National Survey Results).” *UNFPA*.

## The Pretence of Effective Legal and Judicial Frameworks

The government of Kyrgyzstan made bride kidnapping illegal in 1994,<sup>25</sup> though the Soviet Union had introduced a ban in 1920.<sup>26</sup> Despite this, Kyrgyz men still frequently kidnap brides, and authorities rarely punish them due to low reporting rates and the social perception of this harmful practice as a “tradition.”<sup>27</sup> The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic recognizes and protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of its citizens concerning marriage. Article 26 states that “marriage is not permitted without the consent of both persons entering into it.” The Constitution, in the same article, also forbids early marriages by stating that “a family is created on the basis of the voluntary marriage of a man and a woman who have reached the legal age of marriage established by law.”<sup>28</sup> The amendments to the Criminal Code enacted in 2021 further regulate and impose criminal liability for crimes related to bride kidnapping. Under Article 172, the abduction of a person for marriage is punishable by imprisonment for a term of five to seven years, while the abduction of a minor (under the age of 18) for the purpose of marriage is punishable by imprisonment for seven to ten years.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Article 175 punishes parents, religious officiants, and adults taking part in a religious marriage ceremony involving a child if the marriage violates legal age requirements with imprisonment for three to five years.<sup>30</sup>

Although the law explicitly prohibits bride kidnapping and prescribes punishment for such crimes, the issue lies in its ineffective enforcement. Many cases of *ala kachuu* go unreported, and those that reach court rarely result in satisfactory outcomes for victims. In 2021, 560 cases were registered under the article “kidnapping of a person for the

<sup>25</sup> Kenza Rharmoui. “Le mariage par enlèvement au Kirghizistan: une pratique à l’épreuve du temps,” *Gender in Geopolitics Institute*, (October, 1, 2021), retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://igg-geo.org/en/2022/10/12/marriage-by-kidnapping-in-kyrgyzstan-a-practice-that-stands-the-test-of-time/#r+8974+3+7>.

<sup>26</sup> Werner. «Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition.»

<sup>27</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: New rape case highlights need for immediate action to end appalling “bride kidnapping” practice,” *Amnesty International*, (June 15, 2018), retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/kyrgyzstan-new-rape-case-highlights-need-for-immediate-action-to-end-appalling-bride-kidnapping-practice/>.

<sup>28</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic. “*Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic*,” retrieved March, 16, 2025, from <https://www.gov.kg/ru/p/constitution>.

<sup>29</sup> “Уголовный Кодекс Кыргызской Республики от 28 октября 2021 года № 127,” Юрист, retrieved March 17, 2025, from [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=36675065&pos=1880:-53#pos=1880:-53](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36675065&pos=1880:-53#pos=1880:-53).

<sup>30</sup> “Уголовный Кодекс Кыргызской Республики от 28 октября 2021 года № 127.”

purpose of marriage,” but only 5 percent of these cases went to court.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, many police officers are poorly trained to handle cases of bride kidnapping, often treating them as private matters that should be resolved between the families of the abductor and the victim, rather than as criminal offenses requiring legal intervention. For instance, the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of Interior reports that 64 percent of police officers in the southern city of Osh perceive bride kidnapping as “normal,” while the majority, 82 percent, think that the women involved in these abductions “provoke” the incidents.<sup>32</sup>

A horrific case of bride kidnapping in 2018, in which a young woman was kidnapped twice by the same abductor and ultimately killed in a police station after being left alone with him, sparked public outrage in the country and dissatisfaction with law enforcement’s negligence and disinterest.<sup>33</sup> Another striking case in 2021 involved a young woman who was kidnapped and strangled by her abductor, who then committed suicide by stabbing himself. Even though the victim’s family reported the kidnapping to the police shortly after the abduction occurred, the officers laughed and told the victim’s relatives that they would soon be celebrating at a wedding, as this was a typical bride kidnapping. The victim’s mother believed that the problem was that investigators did not consider her daughter’s kidnapping a crime.<sup>34</sup> These cases highlight the country’s ineffective legal frameworks, due primarily to poor law enforcement practices and widespread ignorance among police officers, which continue to undermine women’s rights and legal protections.

## Call for Action

The practice of *ala kachuu* has resurfaced in a form that is frequently harmful to women, leading to numerous negative consequences for

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<sup>31</sup> “New Criminal Code amendments: Punishment for ‘Bride Kidnapping,’” *UNDP*, (April 7, 2022), retrieved March 17, 2025, from <https://www.undp.org/kyrgyzstan/press-releases/new-criminal-code-amendments-punishment-bride-kidnapping#:~:text=In%20Kyrgyzstan%2C%20kidnapping%20for%20marriage,for%20five%20to%20seven%20years>.

<sup>32</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: New rape case highlights need for immediate action to end appalling ‘bride kidnapping’ practice,” *Amnesty International*.

<sup>33</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: New rape case highlights need for immediate action to end appalling ‘bride kidnapping’ practice,” *Amnesty International*.

<sup>34</sup> Zhibek Begaliyeva, “‘She loved life and was in a hurry to live.’ Relatives and friends remember the murdered Aizada Kanatbekova,” Kloop, (April 9, 2021), retrieved March 17, 2015, from <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/04/09/ona-lyubila-zhizn-i-toropilas-zhit-rodnye-i-podrug-i-vspominayut-ubituyu-ajzadu-kanatbekovu/>.

their well-being and affecting the entire Kyrgyz community.<sup>35</sup> This serious issue requires urgent action. As a severe violation of women's rights and a threat to their physical and mental health, bride kidnapping both results from and reinforces the patriarchal system of inequality within the Kyrgyz society, creating a cycle of abuse and neglect for many women. It has been reported that non-consensual kidnappings have contributed to a decrease in life expectancy, an increase in child mortality, and a rise in instances of suicide.<sup>36</sup> Another study finds that children born to mothers in kidnap-based marriages have lower birth weights, likely due to the severe psychological and physical trauma endured by the mothers, suggesting that *ala kachuu* not only has adverse consequences for the abducted women but for their children as well.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, marriages resulting from violent abductions are twice as likely to end in divorce compared to love marriages, and women in kidnap-based marriages report lower life satisfaction compared to women in non-forced marriages.<sup>38</sup>

## Recommendations

Considering the grave repercussions of *ala kachuu* for the Kyrgyz community as a whole, this policy brief suggests several recommendations that permeate the legal, cultural, religious, social, and economic frameworks of the Kyrgyz society in order to eliminate or at least alleviate this serious issue:

- Strengthen legal enforcement through specialized and regular training for police officers that focuses on the cultural, legal, and psychological aspects of bride kidnapping. Such training should include understanding the negative consequences of *ala kachuu*, recognizing signs of trauma in victims, and learning how to conduct sensitive investigations and approach victims, all to foster proper reporting. NGOs, activists, and psychologists can

<sup>35</sup> Handrahan. "International Human Rights Law and Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>36</sup> Handrahan. "International Human Rights Law and Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>37</sup> Charles M. Becker, Bakhrom Mirkasimov and Susan Steiner, "Forced Marriage and Birth Outcomes," *Demography*, Vol. 54, No. 4, (2017), p. 1401, retrieved March 19, 2025, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13524-017-0591-1#citeas>.

<sup>38</sup> Dana Bazarkulovaa and Janice Compton., "Marriage traditions and investment in education: The case of bride kidnapping," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, (July 2020), p.162, retrieved March 19, 2025, from <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/jcecon/v49y2021i1p147-163.html>.

play an active role in providing training, ensuring that officers are well-equipped to handle these cases effectively and with more empathy. Ultimately, officers must start implementing the law, which clearly defines criminal responsibility for kidnappers.

- Educate older generations, particularly the groom's parents and relatives, who often put significant pressure on young men and women to accept *ala kachuu*, about its devastating consequences. Local community leaders and activists can organize meetings with residents, especially in rural areas, where they can share personal stories from victims and present research findings that highlight the harmful effects of *ala kachuu* and its misinterpretation as an old custom.
- Provide an informative and educational school curriculum, particularly targeting young men, to create a valuable space for them to learn about the negative effects of bride kidnapping, challenge myths surrounding the practice, and develop better communication skills. Teachers and professors can promote the values of love-based marriages, which often lead to healthier, more equitable relationships, and help young men understand the benefits of courtship and communication without resorting to the aggressive and degrading practice of kidnapping.
- Empower women with access to education and financial independence as more educated and financially independent women are less likely to become victims of forced marriages. In this regard, providing university scholarships to girls, especially in rural areas, can reduce the risk of kidnapping, as female students would be sent to urban areas where kidnappings are rare. Obtaining a degree can help women secure better job opportunities and become more financially independent, thus making them less prone to kidnapping.
- Religious leaders can use sermons, community gatherings, and religious teachings to raise awareness about the harms of bride kidnapping. They can clarify that forced marriages are not supported by Sharia law and encourage individuals to report cases of bride kidnapping, as well as provide victims with information about available legal and social services. Religious leaders can also refuse to conduct marriages that are non-consensual, which could be another effective method of curbing *ala kachuu*.

- Popular singers, actors, and influencers, can use their popularity to raise awareness about the harmful practice of *ala kachuu*. Engaging such individuals in public campaigns and having them use their social media channels to educate and dispel harmful misconceptions about bride kidnapping can be particularly effective in reaching the younger population.

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