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# Bride Kidnapping in the Kyrgyz Republic

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## Introduction: Bride kidnapping in a "country full of surprises"

Bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan<sup>1)</sup> (*ala kachuu* in Kyrgyz) is the act of abducting a woman to marry her and includes a variety of actions, ranging from consensual marriage to kidnapping and rape. While widespread, the practice is neither well-researched nor well understood as a social phenomenon. Bride kidnapping was made unlawful during the Soviet period in Central Asia and is officially illegal in independent Kyrgyzstan (Halle 1938, 129; Criminal Code 1994). However, the consensus of many university students, teachers, and professionals with whom we had contact is that it still happens frequently and is seldom if ever punished or recognized as problematic. While illegal, bride kidnapping is often popularly defined as a national tradition as opposed to a crime. In an English language textbook published by the Bishkek International School of Management and Business and the United Nations Development Programme, for example, a passage describing an incident of bride kidnapping entitled "Being Stolen" ends with the words:

After some time, she fell in love with him too. Now they have four children. They never fight, and they live in peace. They have now been living happily together for twenty years. They respect each other, which is very important. This is the most popular way of stealing future wives. There are about four ways of stealing. The practice of the older generation has shown that such marriages are stable. Our Government does not allow stealing. But in spite of that,

stealing is still common here. Kyrgyzstan is a country of surprises!  
(1995, 49)

Such matter-of-fact treatment of the issue is commonplace. One foreign news correspondent covering a story about bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan even commented that she "had been told that the practice of bride stealing was so common that [she] had persuaded [herself] that it must be some kind of courting ritual" (Lloyd-Roberts 1999a).

Preliminary research suggests that this assumption can be partially explained by the fact that the term bride kidnapping is colloquially used to describe a wide variety of qualitatively different actions, ranging from consensual marriage (women who help arrange their own "kidnappings") to abduction and rape. Although even scholars often conflate these different actions when discussing bride kidnapping (cf. Werner 1997), it is important to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual processes when attempting to understand the social significance of kidnapping and its impact on women's rights. A non-consensual abduction by force or deception is a violent act. On the other hand, when women and men mutually agree to use this process for establishing a marriage, they assume control of whom and when they marry; in effect, they use one "tradition" to liberate themselves *from* another tradition that grants power over men's and women's marital status to their parents. They can assume power privately by relinquishing it publicly. To define this as kidnapping, however, is misleading, and not only makes for confusing discourse, but also challenges the legitimacy of claims of non-consensual abduction. It is therefore important for researchers to distinguish between the qualitatively different acts referred to by this name.

This research explores this range of experiences and offers insight into what proportion of bride kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan may in fact be consensual. It also exposes discrepancies in male and female understandings of "consent", challenges whether "stable" marriages are necessarily marriages which honor and promote the rights of each of the marriage partners, and reveals the impact of bride kidnapping on the rights of women in Kyrgyzstan.

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### **Learning to ask the right questions: background and methodology of the study**

The impetus for this exploratory research project grew from informal observations in university settings and was developed with the participation and cooperation of a number of university students, academics, and members of non-governmental organizations throughout the Kyrgyz Republic. During the 1998-1999 academic year, Kleinbach was a Fulbright Lecturer teaching Professional Ethics to business students at Osh State University in Osh, Kyrgyzstan (southern Kyrgyzstan), and Amsler was a Civic Education Project Lecturer<sup>2)</sup> teaching Sociology at the American University in Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, the capital city in northern Kyrgyzstan. Through class discussions, they discovered that bride kidnapping was not only practiced but common, and that many of their students had first or second-hand knowledge of a kidnapping case. When, for example, Kleinbach asked his ethics class how many of them personally knew of at least one case of bride kidnapping, approximately two-thirds of the students raised their hands. This question was followed by an interesting discussion about the ethical nature of bride kidnapping – whether it is good or bad, and what ethical principles may be violated by the practice. At this point, the female students were very vocal, and only a few male students defended it as "a tradition that we cannot criticize." The most controversial part of the discussion was whether or not the students and the society had a responsibility to discourage or stop the practice in order to protect freedom of choice, equal opportunity, and a democratic voice for women.

In Bishkek, Amsler learned that many of her students not only were willing to discuss the issue, but also were well-acquainted with the practice. On 22 March 1999, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published an article on its World News web page entitled "Kyrgyz

bride theft goes awry" (Lloyd-Roberts 1999a). Because the article detailed the experience of a journalist who observed and intervened in a bride kidnapping, it seemed appropriate to use the piece to discuss the ambiguous ethics of participant and non-participant observation. Instead of focusing on this question, however, students in the research class spent much of their time debating the accuracy of the account, discussing the frequency of the practice in urban and rural areas, and sharing their own personal experiences of bride kidnapping. The same article evoked similar discussions at Osh State.

Although these classroom debates revealed that bride kidnapping was widespread and commonly practiced in Kyrgyzstan, they also suggested that there was no consensus among students as to who did it, how it was done, why it was done, how frequently it happened, and whether it should be classified as a national tradition or as a criminal act and violation of human rights. Based on these questions, we decided to conduct an exploratory study of the who, what, and why of this practice. We developed a pilot questionnaire, which we then distributed in Russian to small groups of university students in a series of three focus groups at Osh State University. After revising the format and questions based on their collective suggestions and responses, we translated a final English version of the questionnaire into both Russian and Kyrgyz and began distributing it to respondents.

This preliminary study is not based on a random probability sample, but rather on a sample of convenience designed to obtain a wide variety of general information which can be used in designing future research. We surveyed anyone who had first-hand knowledge of a case of bride kidnapping and was willing to complete the four-page form. The respondents were primarily students and academic colleagues, but the sample includes parents of students, friends, and acquaintances of colleagues as well. In order to avoid multiple reports of the same incident, we controlled for dates of the kidnappings and the ages, educational levels and home regions of the men and women involved.

The difficulties of even this "convenient" sampling technique both reveal the sensitive nature of the issue and suggest that bride kidnapping is something that people are interested in discussing critically if given the opportunity to do so. At first, many people were hesitant to discuss

the topic and often seemed uninterested in filling out a questionnaire when approached directly. Often they would say or imply that they did not know of any cases of bride kidnapping. We therefore began to explain in more detail what we were doing, why we were interested in knowing about the issue, how the survey would be interpreted and published, and that they would answer anonymously and have the opportunity to write narratives of their experience in Kyrgyz, Russian, or English. Within minutes of such explanations, we found that almost everyone we approached was willing to complete a questionnaire.

During the months of May and June, 1999, we collected 225 questionnaires from the cities of Osh (southern Kyrgyzstan), Bishkek (northern Kyrgyzstan), and Jalal-Abad (south-central Kyrgyzstan). Students and colleagues are continuing to distribute these pilot questionnaires throughout the country in the Isfana (western), Naryn (central), and Talas (eastern) regions as well as in Bishkek. The general results from this preliminary study results which strongly suggest that the issue demands further research – are outlined below.

### **Kyrgyz bride kidnapping in historical context**

Although there are few English-language books or articles written specifically about bride kidnapping in Central Asia, the issue has received some attention in anthropological research about family, marriage, and the economy of the region (Werner 1997) as well as in works on the status and roles of women in traditional, Soviet, and post-Soviet societies (Massell 1974; Halle 1938). During the early twentieth century, a number of Soviet reformers and researchers gained interest in the status of women in Central Asia, particularly in the influence of Islamic law and tradition on women's education, working conditions, and social opportunities. While there is no evidence that any reformers or researchers focused exclusively on bride kidnapping, a few made note of the practice as one of many "residual" patriarchal and feudal practices which limited the political, economic, and human rights of women in modern society. These texts provide unique insight into the ways bride kidnapping was perceived and understood by foreign observers during the early part of this century. More recently, a number of individuals

and women's organizations in Kyrgyzstan have commented on the nature and prevalence of bride kidnapping, and have begun defining it as a violation of women's and human rights (Eshimkanova 1998; Lloyd-Roberts 1999a; Abramzon 1990; Diamond Association 1995, 1997).<sup>3)</sup>

Because abducting a woman for the purposes of marrying her is not a uniquely Kyrgyz tradition, modern bride kidnapping cannot be sufficiently understood simply as an element of nomadic culture that evolved in isolation on the Central Asian steppe or as a resurgence of a practice that was eliminated by Soviet authorities in Central Asia during the twentieth century, as is commonly asserted (Extra Wife; Halle 1938). This Kyrgyz "national tradition" in fact has a long history in other parts of Central Asia including Kazakhstan<sup>4)</sup> (Werner 1997) and Turkmenistan (Eshimkanova 1998; Halle 1938), as well as in the Caucasus (Halle 1938).

Historically, bride kidnapping is closely tied to economics, social structure, family organization, and gender stratification and has assumed many different forms and functions in other parts of the world such as Japan (Shida 1999), Turkey, and China, as well as among the Asian Hmong (Moua 1995). The issue has most recently gained attention in Ethiopia, where a woman who had been kidnapped was legally acquitted for shooting and killing the man who had abducted and raped her (Metcalf 1999).

In 1938, Fannina Halle claimed that instances of bride kidnapping in Central Asia were simply "symbolic relics" of a more prevalent and violent practice (93). More recently, however, Cynthia Werner asserted that 80% of all marriages in a particular region of southern Kazakhstan in the late 1990s were by kidnapping (1997, 6). While some forms of marriage-by-abduction may be consensual "invented traditions", such as the "kidnapping" role-plays of the Shintoist wedding ceremony in Japan (Shida 1999), our research about contemporary kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan reveals that many women are actually abducted and forced to marry against their will.

Because much of the scholarship about bride kidnapping has been ethnographical, we have a number of detailed descriptive accounts which reveal that the abduction act and subsequent wedding ceremony are remarkably consistent across time and space. From folk songs to

legends to modern-day accounts, the song remains the same: women, without their consent, are seized by men (often accompanied by male friends) who have decided to marry them, thrown across a horse (or in modern accounts, into a car), taken to an undisclosed location, sometimes raped or otherwise violated, and held until families of both the "bride" and "groom" negotiate an agreement (often financial) for the marriage to become official (Halle 1938, 92; Metcalfe 1999). A comparison of Halle's description of a Cherkess kidnapping in the early twentieth century and one woman's account of a kidnapping in contemporary rural Kyrgyzstan reveals striking similarities and consistencies in the kidnapping procedure. According to Halle,

If, for instance, a Kabard resolved to marry a girl whom he had already chosen, the typical plan of campaign for the capture was devised. He assembled his friends, armed and mounted like himself, and went with them to a place where the girl was bound to pass on the way to the well, or elsewhere. There he remained in hiding until the girl of his choice came in sight. The man then swung her on to his saddle with a firm grip and the booty was carried to his relatives or friends in a wild gallop. If the bitterly offended parents of the bride did not immediately give chase and that was seldom of much use the bride's whereabouts were kept secret until mutual negotiations led to an agreement. (1938, 92)

The passage above bears striking resemblance to the following account of a kidnapping in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1997:

One day an interesting thing happened. I was leading the cows home and was stopped by about 10 men on horses. One of them approached me and said, "We need to talk to a girl named Chinara.<sup>5)</sup> She lives in this house. Can you call her for us?" I said, "Why should I call her?" The man explained that he was Chinara's uncle. I wondered to myself why he couldn't call her himself if he was her uncle. With

my question in mind, I shouted Chinara's name. Her mother came out of the house. She then called her daughter. She finally came out too and asked what the problem was. I told her that her uncle was waiting for her. She said she had no uncle, but she decided to see who it was. I went back to my cows. But after some time I heard a loud voice calling for help. When I looked at her side, I saw the men were throwing her from one horse to another and every man caught her. Very shortly after they speedily left the place. I later learned Chinara was twenty. Her mother told me that she was stolen. My grandma then told me that it was a tradition there to steal by horse. I returned home to Uzgen. Some years after I asked my grandmother what happened to that girl. "She has one child and is happy", she said. When I recall that event my heart is tortured. I never visited that village again.

There are, of course, many variations within this general framework; however, descriptions of the process remain fairly consistent over space and time.

### **Theorizing bride kidnapping as a social institution**

What is less clear, however, are answers to the "who" and "why" questions. Does a particular sort of man kidnap a particular sort of woman? Why did this practice begin, and if it is indeed a "nomadic" tradition, how and why is it maintained in a largely sedentary society? Most importantly, how can bride kidnapping be understood as a complex social institution as opposed to as a "national tradition?" Halle, for example, specifically classifies "marriage by capture" as only one of many forms of "patriarchal marriage" that were practiced in societies of the eastern Soviet republics during the early twentieth century, including polygyny, bigamy, divorce, levirate, and marriage by purchase (1938). This contextualization highlights the economic roots and functions of the practice which are often neglected in descriptions of it as a national tradition. Anthropological analyses of both arranged marriages and

bride kidnapping also emphasize the importance of marriage rituals and rights in confirming marriage as a social and financial relationship between families as opposed to a sacred union of individuals (Halle 1938; Werner 1997). In addition to positing hypotheses about the relationship between property, class, tribal and clan identity, and marriage practices, Halle also posits that the general social acceptance of kidnapping in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Soviet East was only one symptom of a more generally patriarchal and masculinist society that valued "manly qualities, such as courage, daring, strength, and bravery" (1938, 91) and that regarded women largely as labor and property. This assertion that kidnapping is both a product, producer, and reproducer of gender stratification and inequality is also echoed in much more recent comments about the status of women in post-Soviet Central Asia (Diamond Association 1997; Eshimkanova 1998).

### **Bride kidnapping in international popular culture**

Central Asia has no monopoly on patriarchy. The issue of bride kidnapping rears its head in international popular culture as well as in academic work. Pseudo-kidnappings are now sometimes proffered as quaint ceremonial diversions to "spice up" ordinary wedding ceremonies in the "enlightened" west. Brides and grooms in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States can visit any number of helpful Internet pages that offer information about where wedding traditions originated and how they might be playfully revived. One American regional guide listed a number of wedding traditions "that date back to ancient times", including the belief that

marriages were originally made by the Groom kidnapping his potential Bride. He would take her away from her tribe with the help of a warrior friend, his Best Man. He would help him fight off other men who wanted this woman as well as help him prevent her family from finding them. The Groom and his Bride would go into hiding so the Bride's family could not find them...(the Honeymoon). (Area guide 1999)

A regional guide from the United Kingdom expands on this same theme, remarking that

The origin of the wedding veil is unclear but it is thought that it predates the wedding dress by centuries. One explanation is that it is a relic of the days when a groom would throw a blanket over the head of the woman of his choice when he captured her and carted her off. (UK Wedding Traditions 1999)

Such descriptions not only suggest that bride kidnapping has a long history and vast geographical influence, but also are somewhat consistent with contemporary accounts of kidnappings. The role of the best man in the first account, for example, is similar to that of the man's friends in contemporary kidnappings, many of whom assume a dominant role in arranging and executing the abduction. The assumption that we do not now live in times when women are "captured and carted off" also suggests that there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the variety of marital institutions now functioning throughout the world and misinformation circulating about the dominance or lack thereof of consensual choice of marriage partners.

Because one of the primary obstacles to addressing the issue of bride kidnapping in public discourse is its ambiguous definition and its simultaneous association with Kyrgyz (or Ethiopian, or Hmong) traditions and identity, the status of women in Central Asia, and universal human rights, it is important that people choose their words carefully when they talk about kidnapping. The following research report is thus presented in the hope that the voices of women and men from Kyrgyzstan speaking about their experiences of bride kidnapping will encourage readers, researchers, and the general public to take the issue of forced marriage and women's rights more seriously.

## Results

The results of this research challenge notions that bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan is predominantly a consensual practice, and reveal that, while many Kyrgyz people may refer to it as a "national tradition", there is very little consensus among the populous as to its causes or legitimacy. This research clearly suggests that in the majority of kidnapping cases, this national tradition is non-consensual as it is currently practiced. This of course raises serious questions about the impact of bride kidnapping on the rights of women in Kyrgyzstan, particularly those related to Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses."<sup>6)</sup> In addition, the findings of this study reveal that understandings of bride kidnapping are often gender specific, and that qualitative differences between kidnapping by deception and kidnapping by force contribute to confusion about the nature and degree of "consent." These discrepancies also raise concerns about the possibility for unified measures to understand and, if necessary, stop the practice.

Because this questionnaire was not administered to a random sample of a particular population, we cannot generalize the specific quantitative results of the study to any particular group within Kyrgyzstan. In addition, it is important to recognize that the information was provided primarily by people who have their own memories and interpretations of the details and meanings of the particular cases of bride kidnapping on which they reported. Nevertheless, the statistics do provide a general picture of the who, what, and how of bride kidnapping, and the qualitative narratives that some respondents wrote about particular cases reveal a great deal about the variety of experiences with and the range of opinions about the issue.

On some of the questions, such as whether the woman consented to the marriage, there is a notable difference between the male and female respondents' responses as to how and why kidnappings proceed. We suspect that this is due either to gendered perceptions of bride kidnapping or to a bias in selecting the kinds of cases on which to report in the questionnaire. Although each questionnaire focused on one individual instance of bride kidnapping, many respondents said they knew of more than one case.

### **Who responded to the survey?**

Because our target population was university students, the 225 respondents were overwhelmingly young (with an average age of 23) and unmarried (76%). Three-quarters of them were enrolled in a course of study at institutions of higher education at the time that they completed the questionnaire. The sample was far from homogeneous, however, as 25% of the respondents had varied occupations and professions, and men completed one-third of the questionnaires. The sample was predominantly Kyrgyz, but included 8 responses from Russians, 3 from Tatars, 1 from an Azerbaijani and 1 from a Ukrainian. The questionnaires were completed in 3 languages: Kyrgyz (117), Russian (106) and English (2). This young, predominantly female Kyrgyz sample provides one window on the practice of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan; however, similar kinds of information must now be collected from both men and women in different age cohorts, professions, and geographical regions.

### **Who are the men and women involved in bride kidnapping?**

Bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan seems to be an almost exclusively Kyrgyz phenomenon. All but six of the kidnappings described in our study involved ethnic Kyrgyz men and women. Of the other six, one involved a Tatar woman and a Kyrgyz man, one a Tatar couple, one a Kyrgyz woman and a Kyrgyz-Kazakh man, one a Kyrgyz woman and a Kyrgyz-Uzbek man, one a Kyrgyz-Ukrainian woman and a Kyrgyz man, and the other a Georgian woman and a Russian man. The last two of these kidnappings did not result in marriages. We have no evidence of bride kidnapping taking place among the Uzbek population of Kyrgyzstan. At the time of kidnapping, kidnappers are reported to have ranged in age from 17 to 45, the average being 23.5 years. Kidnapped women tended to be slightly younger than their kidnappers, ranging in age from 16 to 28, with an average of 19.8 years. (See table 1)

These young ages raise questions about the impact of bride kidnapping on educational opportunities. One of the main objections to bride kidnapping is that it prevents young women from completing their university, and sometimes secondary, education. One young musician

interviewed by Sue Lloyd Wright, for example, expressed regret that his kidnapped wife was unable to complete her university training, but claimed that "we're happy now and she and the baby inspire my music" (Lloyd-Roberts 1999b). Of the 225 couples involved in the kidnappings, we have information on the level of education for 203 of the men and 216 of the women. As indicated above, these findings indicate that people involved in kidnappings are reasonably well educated, and almost half the men and women had completed at least some, if not all, higher education (see Table 1). Nevertheless, although some women may return to school after getting married, many of those who are kidnapped do not have the opportunity to do so.

### **When did the kidnappings take place?**

Although we cannot determine the frequency of bride kidnapping in early decades from this data and the responses most likely reflect the young age of our respondents, it is clear that the practice both existed in the Soviet period and is a contemporary issue. We have dates for 178 of the reported kidnappings. They are as follows: 1960-1969 = 1, 1970-1979 = 16, 1980-89 = 9, 1990-1995 = 35, 1996 = 23, 1997 = 23, 1998 = 52, January - May 1999 = 19. Researchers interested in the historical and comparative aspects of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan would be wise to make inquiries of a population that more closely approximates the age distribution of the republic.

### **What was the familiarity among men and women involved in kidnappings?**

Our questionnaire raises interesting questions about definitions of what it means to "know" someone, what it means to "love" someone, and how gender shapes these definitions. According to the respondents, only 4% of the men kidnapped women whom they did not know, whereas 18.8% claimed that the women were kidnapped by men whom they did not know. When asked if the man was in love with the woman he kidnapped, 53.8% of the respondents answered positively. Within this percentage, however, a greater proportion of men (66%) than women (48%) believed that the man was in love with the woman. A similar question about whether the women were in love with the men yielded a

figure of only 28.3% (36% male & 23% female). A number of respondents claimed that the woman "learned to love" her kidnapper, while others reported that the couple divorced because "she did not love him" or she "hadn't loved him when she was stolen." (See Table 2) Even with a range of responses, we see that nearly one in five of the kidnapped women did not know the men they were to marry, and less than one in three claimed to be in love with their future husbands.

### **What is the Degree of Mutual Consent by Men and Women Involved in Kidnappings?**

One justification for bride kidnapping is that it is a ritualistic tradition of mutual consent, meaning that both the woman and the man agree to the act and to be married. Based on the results of this survey, however, the actual level of mutual consent in kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan is relatively low. According to our respondents, only 25% of the kidnappings were mock abductions conducted with the woman's consent.<sup>7)</sup> Interestingly, this question yielded a great discrepancy between male and female responses, with 44% of the men claiming that the kidnapping was consensual, as opposed to 14% of the women. In addition, 45% of the women were kidnapped through deception (36% M & 51% F) and 26.5% by physical force (22% M & 28% F).<sup>8)</sup>

The distinction between deception and force can perhaps best be illustrated with specific examples from respondents. One woman, abducted by physical force, was

taking her final exams for high school. After her first exam, she came to her friend's birthday party. And it was there when my brother and his friends called her out of the house and pushed her into a car, by force. Now they have one child.

In another case, the woman was deceived into accompanying her kidnappers:

The woman and her ex-boyfriend talked, and he asked if he could catch a taxi and take her to her university. The taxi that drove by was a

mouse trap. They got in and on every other street the car picked up men, supposedly his friends, as if he suddenly saw them and decided to give them a ride. She felt that she was going to be kidnapped right after the second man, a friend, got into the car. She didn't know who was going to kidnap her, because suddenly when the car got full, her ex-boyfriend, giving some reason, got out of the car and never returned.

In addition, respondents claimed that the man wanted the kidnapping to occur in 86% (79% M & 90% F) of the cases and was involved in planning the kidnapping in 81% (83% M & 80% F). In contrast, the figures for the women who wanted the kidnapping to happen and who were involved in the planning were 17.5% (29% M & 11% F) and 12% (21% M & 8% F), respectively. Friends of the man were highly conspicuous in the kidnappings, being involved in planning 77.5% of the cases and in the physical act in 89% of the cases. Again, statistics for friends of the woman are much lower, being 14% and 21%, respectively. The differences in the desires of the man's and woman's parents are also notable in a culture where arranged marriages are common. Among the mothers of the men, 34% (40% M & 31% F) wanted the kidnapping to happen, but only 7% (13% M & 4% F) of the mothers of the women desired it. Among fathers of the men, 32% (38% M & 28% F) wanted the kidnapping versus 4% (9% M & 2% F) of the fathers of the women.

A number of the qualitative responses illuminate these different family roles. In one case, for example, the man's "sister was supposed to see if [the woman] was a good 'candidate' for her brother." In another, the woman was kidnapped "under the active persuasion of his grandmother", and another man's mother "forced him (or at least convinced him) to do so." In contrast, details about the role and reaction of the women's families were more negative. One respondent claimed that "her mother keeps saying that the daughter is very unhappy, and suffers much from material want." Another wrote that "the woman's parents were absolutely against it. They still have bad relations with their son-in-law." Several people reported that the woman's brothers negotiated her release from the engagement. Of those positive

responses from the women's families, many were passive as opposed to active. One woman who had been kidnapped once "acquiesced" the second time, as did her parents. One respondent claimed that "my father kidnapped my mother three times!" Although she returned home twice, the third time she "decided to give up, because she was concerned what people might think." Another person asserted that "some parents obey the tradition and leave their daughter in the new place, even if she is against it." (See Table 3)

### **How often were women raped after being kidnapped?**

Although rape is often considered a common element of bride kidnapping, this research indicates that the majority of kidnappings in Kyrgyzstan do not involve forced sexual intercourse. According to respondents, 21.8% (19% M & 24% F) of the women were forced to have sex after being kidnapped and before they were considered married. Fifty-two percent answered that the women were not forced to have sex, and 22.9% claimed that they did not know. Although it is uncertain that these figures are reliable, the simple fact that one-fifth of a non-random sample of 225 people report a connection between bride kidnapping and rape warrants further research into this question.

In addition, many of the qualitative responses suggest that symbolic rape and social honor are key factors in women's decisions to stay with their kidnapers. One respondent, for example, claimed that

bride kidnapping is a Kyrgyz tradition. But I don't approve of it, because it doesn't take a woman's consent into account. When a girl is kidnapped, she can leave the place. But if she spent a night, things get complicated. It is assumed that she had sexual intercourse and it will be a shame on her. . . . In many cases parents of the bride let her stay in the new place, even if she does not agree because the parents are concerned about people's "bad tongue."

Another wrote that

if she did not have any sexual intercourse and she doesn't want to marry the person, then she has the full right to return home and cancel the marriage. *But*, it will be difficult for her to get married again, for there will be the fact that she has once been kidnapped.

Finally, one respondent claimed that if a woman refuses to marry the man, she "would always be considered a 'spoiled' or post-marriage woman. And if she came back, no man would marry her after one marriage."

### **How often did kidnappings result in marriage?**

A majority of the kidnappings described in this survey (82.5%) resulted in marriage. Of the remaining 16.6% that did not, approximately half of the marriages were stopped by the woman's family and approximately half by the woman herself. Of the marriages that took place, 69.5% were intact at the time that the survey was conducted.

### **Why were women kidnapped?**

When asked why this woman was kidnapped, the respondents were given ten possible choices and could check as many answers as applied. (In the "other" category, perhaps the most notable response was "because his first choice was kidnapped by another man.") These figures support the theory that in some cases this process may be used by young men (sometimes with the agreement of young women) to bypass the will of either set of parents, including arrangements for different marriages. (See Table 4)

## **Qualitative responses**

Quantitative differences frequently make qualitative differences, e.g., because only 25% of bride kidnappings involved the consent of the women "kidnapped" and over 20% were raped, we can say that this practice is "qualitatively" more detrimental to women than if 90% of the women consented and rape was never involved. Therefore, quantifying responses to questions about familiarity, consent, rape, etc., are

important to gain a sense of the degree to which *ala kachuu* is a positive or negative experience for the women and men involved. Human beings, however, do not experience joy, sadness, fulfillment or repression statistically. We experience life events as personal stories. Therefore, we are including an additional selection of narrative responses to illustrate the range and depth of personal responses to bride kidnapping. All of the following narratives have been translated into English from Russian or Kyrgyz. Some names and place names have been changed to protect the anonymity of respondents and subjects.

The man asked for the hand of the woman. She was shy and said she would think and answer later. Her family didn't have any objections to the personality of the man. While the woman was thinking, her sister went to the man and told him the address of the woman's workplace (office). It was obviously an implication that he should steal her. The man accomplished what the sister wanted. Now they are married.

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The guy stole her two times. The first time she resisted very much. And her parents took her back. The second time she stayed there. She did not love him in fact. But probably later on she started loving him. Now they are (or at least seem) happy, with their lovely baby.

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[Nazgul] was from a wealthy family. She was pretty famous in the town because of her well-known parents. Before leaving, moving from the town (her dad was removed) she broke up with her boyfriend. The fact that she was leaving was not the reason why they broke up. So she graduated from Bishkek and was studying at [a university in that city]. One fine day she met him. The woman and her ex-boyfriend talked, and he asked if he could catch a taxi and take her to her university. The taxi that drove by was a mouse trap. They got in and on every other street the car picked up men, supposedly his friends, as if he suddenly saw

them and decided to give them a ride. She felt that she was going to be kidnapped right after the second man, a friend, got into the car. She didn't know who was going to kidnap her, because suddenly when the car got full, her ex-boyfriend, giving some reason, got out of the car and never returned. So she had a nice trip with four unfamiliar men for four hours to [another town]. Imagine, she couldn't sit comfortably and feel cozy, or lean on somebody, and had to stay awake all four hours. After all, she's a daughter of a well-known person, so she had to behave and show proper behavior. She didn't respond to a single question, tried to look away, or cover her face, or ignore them. They explained to her the reason of kidnapping, but didn't tell her who was the 'future husband.' However, from the atmosphere, [Nazgul] understood who it was. She sat still even when it was time to get out of the car when they got to [the town]. By this time her brother in [that town] already knew that she'd been kidnapped and was on his way [there]. By Kyrgyz traditions, she was supposed to write a letter home, saying that she wants to stay. She refused to write, so she refused to wear a scarf several times. And every time she repeated saying 'My parents will decide for me when they come, I don't know!' By this phrase she didn't mean that she couldn't answer for herself, but that she respects (first of all) her parents' opinion and, second of all, it's a good way to run away from situations where you don't know how to act. Only time solves the problem. When a bride is brought home, girls should accompany her behind the curtain. One of the girls was her classmate. She affirmed her on staying. Nevertheless, her brother came the next day and took her back. Of course, it took him forever to talk, to refuse, to ignore the elder people and stuff. She got back safe and normal. So it happily ended!

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The stealing happened because the guy couldn't pay kalym, because the girl's parents didn't agree to voluntary normal marriage, and she was pregnant besides.

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They steal women because they don't consider the woman's feelings. Men are used to assum[ing] that the woman is destined to settle down when she is "brought to..."

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At the moment, the two have been happily married for four years and are parents of two daughters.

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Some girls, even if they want to get married to the guy, pretend to resist. If she doesn't do so, it's embarrassing. Other girls really do resist, cry, and shout. In my story, the woman resisted "just for tradition", she didn't really mind being stolen. She assumed that, after all, women have to marry, that it was her fate. The couple has been together 28 years. When the husband makes her angry by his undesirable habits or qualities, the wife complains to God "Why was I *destined* to him? Why do you torture me God?" Other times she is happy with his generous soul and childish naivete. When a person's unhappiness was not her/his choice, when he/she was compelled or forced to live a certain way, she feels so weak and resentful of this life. And, it turns out, the *tradition* was her unhappiness. Stealing was the source of her dissatisfaction.

## Conclusions: From lovers' option to abduction and rape

The evidence we have gathered suggests that perhaps as many as one-third of the couples involved in different forms of bride kidnapping (*ala kachuu*) in Kyrgyzstan may be in love, and that approximately one-fourth of the women consent to the kidnapping, even though less than

one-fifth of them want the kidnapping to take place. For this quarter of the cases, we can perhaps understand the act as a consensual lovers' option similar to forms of elopement in many cultures.

When we consider all the cases together, however, we see that three-fourths of the women are taken by deception or force; nearly one-fifth of them do not even know their future husbands, and one-fifth or more are "forced to have sex" before they are married. These cases can be defined as abduction and rape. Although our questionnaire does not address the legal aspects of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, we found no evidence in either the narratives or our many discussions with people that the offense is actively prosecuted or even discouraged by the legal structures. This negligence not only violates Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads that "all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law," (United Nations 1948, 7) but also Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which states that "states parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (a) The same right to enter into marriage; (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent." (Convention 1981, 7)

In terms more general than marriage, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also asserts that "everyone has the right of life, liberty and the security of person." The statistical and narrative information we have collected make it clear that in the majority of cases, the women involved in these kidnappings were denied the right to liberty and the security of their persons. In addition, this liberty is often denied because of cultural shame placed on women who, when possible, refuse to "consent" to be married. Article 5 of the above Convention speaks to this circumstance as well, asserting that

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all

other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women (Convention 1981, 3)

The implications of this research and these International Conventions are that the government and people of Kyrgyzstan and the international community have an obligation to determine what is happening and, if necessary, take appropriate measures to modify this cultural pattern of conduct and gender prejudices to ensure the right of both men and women to freely choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

These results are the preliminary findings of our data analysis. We are in the process of collecting more data and conducting more complex cross-tabulations to control for variables such as age, gender, education, and regional association. In addition, we are working on developing quantitative and qualitative methodology for future research about bride kidnapping, including particular methodological considerations for foreign researchers conducting such studies in Kyrgyzstan and throughout Central Asia. We are also evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of this first inquiry.

This article does not specifically explore the economic or familial implications of bride kidnapping, nor does it develop a historical context for understanding the practice in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. These factors should not be neglected in future research, however, and will undoubtedly provide great insight into why marriage-by-abduction is practiced and how it impacts on women's rights, as well as what it signifies as both a national tradition and a threat to social justice. This research instead aims to expose about the status of women in contemporary Kyrgyzstan what Gregory Massell (1974, 123) claimed was missing in our understanding of that issue in the Soviet era: how prevalent bride kidnapping is, and "the ways in which women [and men,

in this case] themselves perceived and responded to their life-situations."

This study is, for all its informative insight, merely a jumping-off point for future research about bride kidnapping in the Kyrgyz Republic. Based on the responses to this questionnaire and the extraordinary interest that was expressed by numerous people in both the north and south of the country, it is clear that, while we must acknowledge that a great portion of the population of Kyrgyzstan regards bride kidnapping as a national tradition, we need to understand much more about the complexities of bride kidnapping as a social institution. As noted earlier, the figures suggest that some forms of the practice violate a number of basic human rights. Informal conversations with many young women confirm that it restricts their freedom and status as equal citizens – some students who attend university in Bishkek are reluctant to return to their village homes for fear that they will be kidnapped, forced to marry, and prevented from completing their education. This is clearly an issue that demands attention and scholarly research – research designed and conducted cooperatively by local and foreign academics, students, and representatives of non-governmental organizations throughout the country.

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## Tables

Table 1: Who are the Men and Women Involved?

	Range	Mean Average		
Age of Women	16 - 28	19.8		
Age of Men	17 - 45	23.5		
	University	Some Univ./Tech	Secondary	< Secondary
Education of Women	19%	26%	50%	5%
Education of men	33%	19%	42%	6%

Table 2: Familiarity of Men & Women Involved

	All Respondents	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
Man kidnapped woman he did not know	4%	1%	6%
Woman kidnapped by man she did not know	18.8%	13%	21%
Man loved woman he kidnapped	53.8%	66%	48%
Woman loved man who kidnapped her	28.3%	36%	23%

Table 3: Degree of Consent and Involvement

	All Respondents	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
Woman kidnapped with her own	25%	44%	14%

consent			
Woman kidnapped through deception	46%	36%	51%
Woman kidnapped by physical force	26%	22%	28%
Man wanted kidnapping to occur	86%	79%	90%
Woman wanted kidnapping to occur	17.5%	29%	11%
Man helped plan the kidnapping	81%	83%	80%
Woman helped plan kidnapping	12%	21%	8%
Friends of man helped plan kidnapping	77.5%	82%	76%
Friends of woman helped plan kidnapping	14%	13%	14%
Friends of the man helped kidnap woman	89%	91%	88%
Friends of woman helped kidnap woman	21%	18%	22%
Mother of man wanted kidnapping to occur	34%	40%	31%
Mother of woman wanted kidnapping to occur	7%	13%	4%
Father of man wanted kidnapping to occur	32%	38%	28%
Father of woman wanted kidnapping to occur	4%	9%	2%

Table 4: Why was this woman kidnapped?

	All Respondents	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
1. Parents of woman might not agree to marriage	31%	30%	31%
2. To prevent woman from marrying another	29%	32%	27%
3. It is a good traditional way to get a bride	25%	35%	19%
4. Woman might refuse marriage proposal	24%	17%	27%
5. Woman had refused a marriage proposal	17%	19%	17%
6. Man was unable to pay kalym (bride price)	12%	12%	11%
7. The woman was pregnant	6%	14%	2%
8. Parents of man might not agree to marriage	6%	10%	3%

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