

BRIDE KIDNAPPING IN KYRGYZSTAN: A REFLECTION OF CONSERVATIVE VALUES?

by Nadira Mukhamejan and Aidana Zhakypbekova



Photo: Vyacheslav Oseledko/AFP/Getty Images NEWS



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The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1963, 15.

On April 5, 2021, twenty-seven-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova was kidnapped by three men for a forced marriage. A few days later, she was found murdered in the car of one of her kidnapers, who was also dead, having committed suicide. The next day, protests broke out in Bishkek and Osh demanding the resignation of the Minister of Interior Affairs, who oversees the police. Protesters blamed the police for their inaction, convinced that she died because they had been in no hurry to look for her. The popular indignation was further fueled by the fact that three years earlier the nineteen-year-old Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy had been killed under similar circumstances.



**CENTRAL ASIA
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The first part of this article explores the revival of bride kidnapping (*ala kachuu*) and the response of civil society activists who promote women’s rights in Kyrgyzstan. The second part studies the mobilization forces that are changing the perception of bride kidnapping from a cultural tradition to a heinous crime that warrants harsher punishment. The article concludes with a critical analysis on whether laws and blame attribution are sufficient for the eradication of bride kidnapping.

Women Issues on the Agenda of Civil Society Movements

Post-Soviet Nationhood and the Revival of Bride Kidnapping

Bride kidnapping is thought to have originated from nomadic groups in Central Asia, but it is a common practice in many countries, from Europe to Africa. In some cases, the practice is consensual: the woman has already agreed to marriage and the “kidnapping” is merely a formality out of respect for tradition. On the other hand, nonconsensual bride kidnapping occurs when a man abducts a woman and forces her to become his wife. Even though bride kidnapping is illegal, many men, particularly in Kyrgyzstan’s southern regions, continue to perceive it as a feasible way to get married.²

According to the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, “kidnapping a woman to marry against her will” is considered a form of deprivation of liberty³ and is subject to five to seven years of imprisonment; whereas the punishment for abducting minors is punished with seven to ten years in prison.⁴ From an international perspective, bride kidnapping is linked to domestic violence and human trafficking and goes against Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and Article 16 of Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women. However, experience has shown that tightening legal rules to more harshly penalize bride kidnapers is insufficient. Despite existing domestic laws and international obligations, the practice of bride kidnapping is widespread in Kyrgyzstan: ninety-two cases of *ala kachuu* were reported in 2020 and seventy-five of those had their investigations closed without prosecution — only eight cases reached the court.⁵ When police officers and other

¹ Aidai Erkebaeva, “‘Zachem vy perezhivaete?’ Kyrgyzstantsy obvinyayut silovikov v ubiystve 27-letney Ayzady Kanatbekovoy, pokhishchennoy dlya braka po prinuzhdeniyu,” *Mediazona*, April 9, 2021, <https://mediazona.ca/article/2021/04/09/kanatbekova>.

² Snežana Malić, “Bride kidnapping in Kazakhstan: Personal Security perspective,” (paper presented at the conference “Non-Traditional Risks and Challenges to Central Asian Security,” OSCE Academy, Bishkek, May 17-18, 2018), 2.

³ Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, no. 68, dated October 1, 1997, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/568/1190?cl=ru-ru>.

⁴ Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, no. 68, dated October 1, 1997, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/568/1190?cl=ru-ru>.

⁵ Erkebaeva, “Zachem vy perezhivaete?”

law enforcement officials share the same cultural ideas as the kidnappers, abducted women and their families are powerless.⁶

During the Soviet period, the nomadic patriarchal lifestyle was transformed by urbanization and gender equality was supposedly achieved through mass education and employment.⁷ As throughout the Soviet Union, women in Kyrgyzstan were entitled to the same rights as men and were to be equally represented in the senior management of businesses and in regional and local systems of government.⁸ Women could also rely on state-provided childcare and had a professional predominance in teaching, healthcare, local administration, and research.

However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the erosion of social welfare, healthcare, and childcare services. This in combination with Western-sponsored structural adjustment policy aimed at economic reform through foreign trade and the privatization of state assets and industries resulted in reducing women's employment opportunities.⁹ Between 1990 and 2005, the official female employment rate dropped by almost 50%.¹⁰ This drop in employment led to decreased women's presence and activity in the public arena, allowing males to reclaim a traditional role as household head and breadwinner.¹¹

Building Kyrgyzstan's identity as a new nation-state has contributed to a growing reimagining of the past.¹² In such a context, bride kidnapping became a "reinvented tradition" of the pre-Soviet Kyrgyz patriarchal family pattern, supported by a share of the population that valued traditionalism over globalization and nationalism over cosmopolitanism.¹³ As the Committee on the Elimination of

⁶ Malić, "Bride kidnapping," 9.

⁷ Russell Kleinbach and Gazbubu Babaiarova, "Reducing Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan," *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 53, <https://eurasianpublications.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EJSS-1.1.4.pdf>.

⁸ Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost Voices: Central Asian Women Confronting Transition* (London: Zed Books, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350221192>; John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Joanna Pares Hoare, "Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan," (Bishkek: Social Research Center, 2009).

⁹ Anderson, *Island of Democracy*; Mehmet Dikkaya and Ibrahim Keles, "A Case Study of Foreign Direct Investment in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 1-2 (2006): 149-156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930600903213>.

¹⁰ Armin Bauer, David Green, and Kathleen Kuehnast, *Women and Gender Relations: The Kyrgyz Republic in Transition* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997); Farideh Heyat, "Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan: Gender, New Poverty and the Moral Dimension," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 3-4 (2004): 275-287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0263493042000321371>; Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost Voices*; *The Kyrgyz Republic: A Gendered Transition, Soviet legacies and New Risks*, Country Gender Assessment series (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2005); Pares Hoare "Development and Gender," 8.

¹¹ Deniz Kandiyoti, *Agrarian Reform, Gender and Land Rights in Uzbekistan*, Social Policy and Development Paper no. 11 (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2002); *A Gendered Transition*.

¹² Werner, "Bride Abduction," 329.

¹³ Kleinbach and Babaiarova, "Reducing Non-Consensual Bride Kidnapping."

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stated, “bride kidnapping appears to be socially legitimized and surrounded by a culture of silence and impunity.”¹⁴

It is true, however, that bride kidnapping can also be consensual, often occurring in cases when a family cannot afford the traditional wedding festivities. This might partially explain the existing tolerance of the practice.¹⁵ During Kyrgyzstan’s democratic transition after 1991, there was an ideological division in framing women role. Lori Handrahan identified several contested models: the new influence of Islamic values coupled with the “remembering” of nomadic and tribal traditions favored a dominant male role in the society; whereas, the Western, liberal influence was perceived as a continuation of Soviet ideology, with women entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men.¹⁶

Women Rights and Civil Society Movements

Since the first years of independence, Kyrgyzstan has had a massive presence of international aid organizations, which have aimed to facilitate a democratic transition by forming “civil society” organizations that would give citizens to ability to hold their government accountable.¹⁷ The neoliberal vision of building civil society has had several serious consequences. First, it ignored the social organization practices of the population during the Soviet era, assuming that civil society groups and associational communities did not exist in the USSR.¹⁸ Second, Western donors favored particular organizational forms of civil society (like NGOs) that mirrored Western (neoliberal) notions on structure and mission.¹⁹ Increasing the size and prominence of NGOs was associated with strengthening civil society and thereby democracy, regardless of what those organizations were doing or how representative and participatory their practices were.²⁰

A gender mainstreaming trend during the in 1990s²¹ created a “funding stream” to women’s organizations and established a new area of professional activity for women as leaders and

¹⁴ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Report of the Inquiry Concerning the Kyrgyz Republic Under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, CEDAW/C/OP.8/KGZ/1 (New York: UN. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2008), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1648381?ln=en>.

¹⁵ O’Neill Borbieva, “Kidnapping Women.”

¹⁶ Lori M. Handrahan, “Gender and Ethnicity in the ‘Transitional Democracy’ of Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 20, no. 4 (2001): 474–476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930120104645>.

¹⁷ Schulte, “Benchmarking the Progress”; *Review of the History of Establishment and Development of the NGO Sector in the Kyrgyz Republic* (Bishkek: Association of Civil Society Support Centers, 2006).

¹⁸ Janice Giffen, Lucy Earle, and Charles Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia* (Oxford: The International NGO Training and Research Centre, 2005); Schulte, “Benchmarking the Progress.”

¹⁹ Ruth Mandel, “Seeding Civil Society,” *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, edited by C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁰ Joanna Pares Hoare, “Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan.” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 281–298, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1007344>.

²¹ Rebecca Tiessen, *Everywhere / Nowhere: Gender Mainstreaming in Development Agencies* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2007); Julie Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia: Activism, Aid, and NGOs* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2007).

members of civil society groups.²² However, this professionalization of women in gender-focused NGOs and the emergence of Western-educated women’s rights activists has been criticized for several reasons. First, they have been accused of “prioritizing issues for which they can secure grants,” more focused on their own income than actual problems.²³ Second, they were perceived to be implanted artificially from the outside, ignorant to the cultural realities surrounding gender and the conditions of rural women—the most vulnerable to domestic violence.²⁴ Third, the “NGOization” and professionalization of female organizations led to moving the issue of women inequality and vulnerability from the political agenda away, where women would contact the NGO rather than mobilizing for changes in policies.²⁵

As a sociologist and women’s movement activist in Kyrgyzstan noted, “development did not change the essence of political and public patriarchy.” The groups focused on formal lobbying and advocacy did not impact the power relations in the lives of “ordinary women” or the gendered norms in wider society.²⁶ Altogether, it resulted in a “ghettoization” of women’s issues. Prominent female leaders and women’s issues moved outside formal politics and male-dominated political institutions, siloed instead in women’s NGOs.²⁷

Bride Kidnapping: Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage

Since the late 1990s, people in Kyrgyzstan have frequently organized street protests to express their discontent with government activity.²⁸ In thirty years of independence, mass protests have led to the resignation of three different presidents. Thus, there is wide acceptance for the efficacy of mass street gatherings.²⁹ However, public scepticism toward this mechanism has increased since protests against unfair elections in October 2020 were used by imprisoned populist leader Sadyr Japarov as political opportunity to grab power.³⁰

Since the study of Kyrgyz revolutions was mostly focused on elites, the role of the civil society mobilization and its potential in catalyzing changes in national policy reactions has been underresearched.³¹ To understand the nature of protests following the murder of Aizada Kanatbekova, we analyzed discourses in domestic and international media coverage through

²² Pares Hoare, “Doing Gender Activism,” 282.

²³ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁴ Svetlana Shakirova, “Women’s Movement and Feminism in Central Asia: From a Not Comforting Forecast to Efficient Strategies,” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, 2008; Pares Hoare, “Doing Gender Activism,” 283.

²⁵ Pares Hoare, “Doing Gender Activism,” 289.

²⁶ Shakirova, “Women’s Movement and Feminism.”

²⁷ Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal Inderpal, “The NGO Form: Feminist Struggles, States, and Neoliberalism,” in *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*, ed. Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11688xv.4>.

²⁸ Amanda E. Wooden, “Another Way of Saying Enough: Environmental Concern and Popular Mobilization in Kyrgyzstan,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2013): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2013.797165>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁰ Andrea Schmitz, *Revolution Again in Kyrgyzstan: Forward to the Past?* SWP Comment 2021/C 08 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C08>.

³¹ Wooden, “Another Way of Saying Enough,” 322.

discourse analysis, exploring the variety of competing, complementing, or coexisting discourses on bride kidnapping. The latter can be framed as a tradition, a family affair, and a crime. As “patterns of action, habits and conventions that follow relatively explicit rules, discourses inform our ‘instincts’ regarding how to act,”³² and thus, inform our social practices.³³ The analytical strength of discourse analysis is its ability to uncover the power systems that influence the way people think.³⁴

To analyze how the framing of bride kidnapping in domestic media, we selected the news portal *AkiPress*, since it is independent from the government.³⁵ Also, this source reports in the English language, making it possible to compare with international media. The corpus of international media coverage comprises various English-language outlets, such as the BBC, Agence France-Presse, Human Rights Watch, Daily Sabah, the Telegraph, and Al Jazeera. The international sources were selected based on their originality (not reproducing or reprinting the news from other news outlets) and length (more than 150 words). The time frame of the analysis has been between April 8 and 16, 2021, starting with the date of the incident and ending when most outlets had stopped publishing new stories. Articles were selected by searching the following keywords in UniNexis: “bride kidnapping” and “Aizada Kanatbekova,” adding “police” and “protest” as additional filters. The selections were codified inductively, with categories derived from the actual texts to avoid the researcher’s preconceptions.

Results and discussion

AkiPress reported about Aizada Kanatbekova’s murder using the discourse that bride kidnapping is a crime. Article called the incident a “disgraceful phenomenon” and “brutal practice” and which caused “a nationwide outcry,” stressing that Kyrgyzstan outlawed bride kidnapping in 2013. *AkiPress* Journalists wrote that protests in Bishkek and Osh were a reaction to the government’s unprofessionalism and police indifference to women’s rights and were demanding dismissal of officials, accountability from the Ministry of Interior, and tougher punishment for criminals. *AkiPress* also highlighted the fact that in the state’s criminal code, the punishment for bride kidnapping is softer than the punishment for kidnapping minors.

In multiple articles, Aizada Kanatbekova’s death was linked to the 2018 murder of Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy, another victim of bride kidnapping, implying that little progress has been made to ensure women’s safety or enforce legislation. The main people interviewed for these articles were

³² Louisa Parks, “Discourses of Environmental Politics and Governance: Understanding Discourse and ‘Survivalism,’” (lecture for BMO6624: People, Politics and the Planet, University of Trento, Trento, Italy, 11 March 11, 2021).

³³ Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research,” in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1st ed., ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 121.

³⁴ Gordon R. Waitt, “Doing Discourse Analysis,” *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, 2nd ed., edited by Iain Hay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.

³⁵ Bahtiyar Kurambayev et al. “An Investigation of Journalists’ Job Satisfaction IN BISHKEK, Capital of the Kyrgyz Republic.” *Central Asian Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2019): 47–67. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00601003>.

members of parliament and ordinary citizens who expressed their concerns about police actions, dissatisfaction with the “Bishkek Safe City” project that is setting up CCTV in the city, and belief that responsibility lies with the Ministry of Interior and law enforcement agencies. One article was dedicated to the reaction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, which considered the practice a sin and going against rules of Islam.³⁶

The coverage of the incident in international media took a broader approach. For example, *The Telegraph* brought up the subject of women’s bodily autonomy more generally, presenting the event in Kyrgyzstan in relation to a United Nations Population Fund report on the developing countries and comparing the situation with practices in sub-Saharan Africa countries. International media used Western dominant discourses on human and women’s rights to connect the case to the wider global agenda of improving the security of women in relation to domestic abuse, gender-based violence, and femicide.³⁷ These articles also referred to the Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy case, mentioning Kyrgyzstan’s poor record on women’s rights and calling bride abduction in the country a systemic phenomenon.³⁸

Overall, the most frequent combination of discourses throughout the corpus was (1) that bride kidnapping is not a tradition but crime, and (2) that officials must be punished and dismissed. In the sources, the grievance of the police misconduct outweighed the importance of systemic measures against the practice of bride abduction. However, it is important to note that blame attribution is key to mobilization.³⁹ According to blame attribution theory, successful mobilization depends on identifying a target actor responsible for causing or solving the problem.⁴⁰ The discourses that depicted police indifference to women’s rights and the incompetence of the Ministry of Interior combined both a grievance and identified a responsible party.

Remarkably, the activities of women’s NGOs and civil society groups were excluded from the narratives of both domestic and international media. Despite calling for a change in the attitude toward the practice of bride abduction and forced marriage, the media did not offer practical steps to raise awareness or influence policy. Another important conclusion relates the Western-centrism of international media: Kyrgyzstan was framed as falling behind Western standards of human rights protections.

³⁶ “Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan comments on high-profile abduction and murder of Aizada Kanatbekova,” *AKIpress*, April 9, 2021, https://akipress.com/news:656654:Spiritual_Administration_of_Muslims_of_Kyrgyzstan__comments_on_high-profile_abduction_and_murder_of_Aizada_Kanatbekova/.

³⁷ Tolkun Namatbayeva, “Hundreds Protest in Kyrgyzstan After Bride Kidnap and Murder,” *AFP News*, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/hundreds-protest-kyrgyzstan-bride-kidnap-105116068.html>.

³⁸ Syinat Sultanalieva, “Another Woman Killed in Scourge of Kyrgyzstan ‘Bride Kidnappings,’” *Human Rights Watch*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/09/another-woman-killed-scourge-kyrgyzstan-bride-kidnappings>.

³⁹ James Q. Wilson, “The Strategy of Protest: Problems of Negro Civic Action,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 5, no. 3 (1961): 291–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200276100500306>; Mark Irving Lichbach, *The Rebel’s Dilemma*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Debra Javeline, “The Role of Blame in Collective Action: Evidence from Russia,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 107–221, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055403000558>.

⁴⁰ Wooden, “Another Way of Saying Enough.”

As a result of this mobilization, the Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted an internal investigation that resulted in twelve police officers being dismissed from their posts, twenty-seven were given warnings of **professional unsuitability** (*sluzhebnoe nesootvestvie*) and five were severely reprimanded. On April 29, 2021, a bill to toughen the punishment for bride kidnapping was submitted for public discussion. And the first trial in the abduction of Kanatbekova was set to take place on May 27. Five men were charged with aiding in the abduction.⁴¹ These developments can be interpreted as a successful case of mobilization, when the media's framing of the event influenced how the wider audience perceived bride kidnapping and fuelled a collective response.

Are Blame Attribution Instruments and Laws Sufficient for the Eradication of Bride Kidnapping?

As Émile Durkheim stated, law is not a self-governing instrument but the reflection of traditions, values, social norms, and behaviors.⁴² In the case of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, it is important not to overlook those who are affected by the social forces and existing customs and values of a society. Law is an established set of rules based on preexisting mutual moral consent.⁴³ To better illustrate the relationship between the social forces and the law in cases of bride kidnapping, we analyze the effectiveness of police officers when a kidnapped woman asks for help.

A police officer is likely to share the traditional values of Kyrgyz society. He is not impartial because he is also influenced by the preexisting culture and conventions of society. In the case of Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy, police intercepted the kidnapping, bringing both the victim and her abductor to the police station. She was killed at the station when police officers left her alone and unsupervised in a room with her kidnapper.⁴⁴ The decision to leave them alone together reveals some insight into the police officer's perception of and social behavior toward bride kidnapping. Under the law, a police officer is not allowed to leave the victim of the crime alone with the suspected perpetrator. It seems that even when there are written laws that define bride kidnapping as a crime, social traditions and conservative norms regarding women's and men's roles in Kyrgyz society influence the effectiveness of those laws and how or if they are enforced. In such a context, bride kidnapping might be considered a process that helps woman keeping their traditional social role, rather than a crime. Several traditional notions may be driving the acceptance and continuation of bride kidnapping.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Kamila Baymuratova, "Pokhishchenie i ubiystvo Ayzady Kanatbekovoy: Khronologiya sobytij," *Kloop Media*, April 9, 2021, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/04/09/pohishhenie-i-ubiystvo-ajzady-kanatbekovoj-hronologiya-sobytij/>.

⁴² J. A. Barnes, "Durkheim's Division of Labour in Society," *Man* 1, no. 2 (1966): 158-175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2796343>.

⁴³ Alexandria Lundberg McKenna, "Prosecuting Bride Kidnapping: The Law Isn't Enough; Aligning Cultural Norms with the Law," *Journal of International Law* 53, no. 1 (2021): 475-521, <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol53/iss1/16>.

⁴⁴ Nurzhan Toktonazarova, "Kyrgyz Bride Kidnapping Ends In Brutal Stabbing, Prompting Outrage," Radio Free Europe, May 29, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-bride-kidnapping-ends-in-brutal-stabbing-prompting-outrage/29257873.html>.

⁴⁵ Werner, "Bride Abduction"; Lundberg McKenna, "Prosecuting Bride Kidnapping."

1. A woman is expected to marry, especially if she is starting to get “old.”
2. A woman who is raped by the kidnapper may feel ashamed and even be rejected by her family because of the loss of her virginity.
3. Masculinity is judged based on a man having a wife and children and femininity based on being a wife and mother, meaning that men have incentive and power to force a marriage and women have little capacity to refuse.
4. In a culture like Kyrgyzstan where dowry is expected, men who do not have money for it but want to be married may resort to drastic measures. In any case, it seems that woman is framed as a property of a family because she is “sold” to a man.⁴⁶

Moreover, bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan seems to be closely linked to ethnic identification. According to Handraha, bride abductions are performed mainly by ethnic Kyrgyz men.⁴⁷ By kidnapping a woman, a man not only proves his courage and dominance over women but also claims to be honoring his so-called ethnic traditions. In this sense, by complying with kidnapping and forced marriage, a woman “demonstrates loyalty to the ethnicity,”⁴⁸ while by refusing it or denouncing it, she can be accused of rejecting her ethnicity. An abducted woman has thus a number of factors to consider when deciding whether or not to stay with her kidnapper. If she does report the incident to the police, her report will also be substantially influenced by the pre-existing social constraints of conservative values regarding marriage and women’s social status.

Our analysis leads to the conclusion that blame attribution is insufficient to address the roots of bride kidnapping and does not provide a comprehensive approach on how to resist and mobilize against gender-based violence. On the one hand, blame attribution has increased public outrage and raised questions of accountability and legality of bride kidnapping. This has recently led to a public awareness that law enforcement is one of the essential institutions that should be held accountable and may also have the power to eradicate bride kidnapping. But ending bride kidnapping will also require questioning the entrenched conservative values of some segments of Kyrgyz society.

Research Limitations and Conclusions

In Kyrgyzstan, women issues have been gradually displaced from politics to the civil society sector. The country’s successive governments have established legislation criminalizing bride kidnapping and increasing the punishments for perpetrators. However, reforming the law has not been sufficient in changing normative expectations. Civil society mobilization in April 2021 led to the promises of legal amendments to eradicate the practice of bride kidnapping by further toughening the punishments. Framing bride kidnapping as a crime, as well as attributing blame at the responsible authorities led to the transformation of the situation. However, blame attribution and legal instruments alone are not enough to eradicate bride kidnapping. To be effective, resistance to bride kidnapping implies challenging conservative values related to gender roles, marriage expectations, and concepts of femininity and masculinity.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Handrahan, “Hunting for Women.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., 222.