



GSPS | GENDER IN SOCIETY
PERCEPTION STUDY

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Kyrgyz Republic



OCTOBER 2018

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Produced by UN Women Kyrgyzstan Country Office
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RESEARCH REPORT:
VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AND GIRLS

Kyrgyz Republic



Bishkek, October 2018



GENDER IN SOCIETY PERCEPTIONS

STUDY (GSPS) OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

This pillar research report is part of the Gender in Society Perceptions Study (GSPS) funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, a joint undertaking of UN Women, UNFPA and IOM in the Kyrgyz Republic and in partnership with the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. The GSPS is also supported by stakeholders from leading local universities, research institutions, non-governmental organisations and government ministries, including the Office of the President; National Academy of Sciences; National Defence Council; Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth; Department for Security, Law Enforcement and Defence, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The overall objective of the GSPS is to establish household, community and public level data and information on key risk factors for gender inequality and threats for violence affecting women and girls in the Kyrgyz Republic (what is known, believed and practised). Specific objectives of the GSPS are to understand:

- Pressing interpersonal and structural issues leading to gender discrimination, violence and exploitation;
- Community-level trends and shifting societal perceptions of gender stereotypes and relations;
- The relationship between gender inequality, insecurity and potential conflict triggers.

To reach these goals, quantitative and qualitative research was carried out on five topics of key interest to understand gender practices and perceptions in Kyrgyzstan today: women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, violence against women and girls in the form of bride kidnapping and child marriages, women's religious beliefs and practices, and women's involvement in labour migration. The GSPS National Survey Results,

collected by UNFPA and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, were published in Fall 2016. The GSPS pillar reports, each address one of the five topics of interest, and incorporate the findings of the qualitative and quantitative research. The pillar reports and survey are published in English, Russian and Kyrgyz. A general introduction, published separately, provides the full context analysis and methodology for the collection of GSPS publications.

The GSPS was launched to redress the lack of comprehensive studies that focused squarely on sources of gender inequality – and particularly on the attitudes and perceptions that can feed gender inequality – in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to identify the factors relevant for promoting a gender-inclusive peace. The GSPS attempted to identify opportunities and strategies for equal participation of women and girls in community level processes, provide focussed recommendations to state and non-state authorities, and provide evidence for more gender-responsive policies in the Kyrgyz Republic. The results of the GSPS are being widely distributed within the UN system, to the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and among scholars and members of civil society and non-governmental organisations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The implementation of Gender in Society Perception Study (GSPS) was a collective effort, and we owe sincere thanks to the many people who led, participated and contributed in countless ways. We thank everyone who was involved in the design, data collection, data processing and data analysis phases of the study, and we wish to highlight the following contributions:

UN Peacebuilding Fund:

The UN Peacebuilding Fund is to be thanked for its generous funding providing for the opportunity to conduct this research project, which was also financially supported by UN Women.

Government of the Kyrgyz Republic:

We would like to thank the many state agencies of the Kyrgyz Republic who supported the project in various ways. We would like to highlight the assistance provided by Ministry of Labour and Social Development for their facilitation and participation in key project events. We also acknowledge and appreciate the strong commitment by staff of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic which was the quantitative component's implementing partner.

Joint Steering Committee:

The Joint Steering Committee (JSC), co-chaired by the Office of the President and the UN Resident Coordinator with membership from state and civil society organisations and UN agencies, provided oversight over implementation of GSPS. We are grateful to JSC members for monitoring progress to ensure achievement of key results.

Joint Steering Committee Secretariat:

We also thank the JSC Secretariat for regular facilitation between stakeholders and for monitoring progress towards achieving project results and for raising public awareness about joint Government-UN peacebuilding efforts in Kyrgyzstan, including GSPS.

Research Respondents:

The GSPS would not have been possible without the participation of more than 7,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan who devoted their time, energy, and insights to the study as respondents. It is thanks to them for us to be able to present the findings in this and other GSPS-related reports.

Recipient UN Organization Partners:

The GSPS also benefitted from the support and managerial guidance of all three of its implementing partners, UN Women as lead agency and coordinator of the qualitative component, UNFPA which coordinated the quantitative component, and IOM which provided technical support to the overall study. We also thank all UN staff who supported the work, and the three agencies' staff, who offered written contributions, comments, ideas, and generous feedback.

Stakeholders Advisory Group:

The Stakeholder's Advisory Group (SAG) represented a wide range of state stakeholders, research institutions, experts and civil society actors. The SAG served as a platform for multiple state and non-state stakeholders to inform, advise and consult on the research methodology and instruments, and ultimately approving them. We are deeply grateful to those who gave their time to this endeavour and showed their ownership of our joint effort.

Research Team:

Finally, special thanks go to the entire research team, of both the quantitative and qualitative components. Without their oftentimes unflagging dedication, the production of this report would not otherwise have been possible. We acknowledge with gratitude the substantial contributions of the quantitative research team for the produced quantitative analytical report, which was integrated into this report. We also thank the qualitative research team for their commentary, additions, and for their own insightful and detailed reports that were the basis of this write-up.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Adat</i>	local customary practices and tradition observed by Muslim communities in the North Caucasus, Central Asia and Southeast Asia
<i>Aiyl bashchy</i>	heads of village administrations
<i>Aiyl Okmotu</i>	village administration
<i>Akimiat</i>	district administration in cities
<i>Aksakal</i>	male elders, treated as the old and wise of the community. Literally translates as “white beard”
<i>Ala kachuu</i>	bride kidnapping
<i>Apashka</i>	way of addressing husband’s mother
<i>Dzhenes</i>	the married women of the family, i.e., wives of older brothers, uncles, etc.
<i>Imam</i>	leader of a mosque and Muslim community
<i>Kainata</i>	father-in-law for a woman
<i>Kainene</i>	mother-in-law for a woman
<i>Kairylmans</i>	the group of ethnic Kyrgyz people who lived outside of the country, mostly in Tajikistan and returned to their historic motherland a few decades later
<i>Kalym</i>	bride price
<i>Kelin</i>	literally translates as a “daughter-in-law” or a “bride”. In Reeves (2004), kelin “can be used generically to refer to young women who are “in” but not “of” a given household
<i>Kvartalnie</i>	head of local territorial units
<i>Kuyo bala</i>	son-in-law
<i>Marlya</i>	gauze
<i>Moldo</i>	a Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law
<i>Nikah</i>	Muslim matrimonial ceremony
<i>Novostroika</i>	a new settlement inside or outside a city
<i>Oblast</i>	administrative territorial division
<i>Obmennaya</i>	
<i>karta</i>	clinical record of a pregnant client
<i>Sarpai</i>	gifts for the in-laws in the form of clothes
<i>Sevet</i>	gifts for the in-laws in the form of baskets of food
<i>Suyuhchu</i>	good news
<i>Raspiska</i>	a written statement confirming the individual’s personal decisions
<i>Tubetei</i>	national Central Asian headgear, a scull-cap
<i>Uyat bolot</i>	shame
<i>WhatsApp</i>	messaging application for mobile phone

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CEDAW</i>	The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<i>IOM</i>	International Organization for Migration
<i>IDN</i>	State Inspectorate for Minors
<i>GSPS</i>	Gender in Society Perception Study
<i>MICS</i>	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey research
<i>NGO</i>	Non-Governmental Organization
<i>NSC</i>	National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic
<i>VAWG</i>	Violence against Women and Girls
<i>UNICEF</i>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<i>UNFPA</i>	United Nations Population Fund
<i>UN Women</i>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Women’s Empowerment
<i>ZAGS</i>	Official Registry Office

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report of the Gender in Society and Perception Study (GSPS) focuses on violence against women, through the prism of two widespread non-consensual marriage practices in the Kyrgyz Republic. Divided into two main sections, the report focusses on bride abduction and child marriage, seeking to explain society's attitudes and reactions to both. The phenomena are deeply disempowering for women, and will require changes in beliefs, attitudes and institutional priorities to be reversed.

Bride kidnapping (*Ala kachuu*) and early marriage are two widespread practices in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, with an estimated one in five women kidnapped for marriage in the country. Women who have undergone such violence generally experience serious harm to their physical and psychological health, financial and economic independence, opportunities for education and professional development, and life quality. These forms of gender based violence are deeply disempowering for women. Kyrgyzstan has begun to implement legislation to criminalize early and forced marriages but to eradicate the practices will require an all of society, multi-dimensional approach.

The report also analyses the behaviour, motivation, perception and expectations of those who are directly or indirectly involved in child and forced marriage, and concludes that multiple actors, including the groom's family, the women's parents, neighbours, educational and medical professionals, law enforcement and local elders, village and religious authorities, all play roles that perpetuate the practices. While in interviews many expressed negative views on non-consensual marriages, in practice their personal experience and opinions contrasted with their official points of view. Even with legislation since 2013 that imposes up to ten years prison sentences for bride kidnapping, state representatives who were interviewed rarely took direct action to prevent bride kidnapping or early marriage. Conformity to the expected social norms was apparently more beneficial. Especially for the groom's family *Ala kachuu* often brings material and social benefits.

Many of the kidnapped brides are minors, but child marriages are also organised by parents in some instances as forced unions without the kidnapping aspect. They are guided by various motives such as ethno-cultural traditions, medical concerns (based on folk beliefs), girls' early physical maturation,

security reasons, parents' forthcoming labour migration or sickness, and fears that their daughters would never get married. Teen pregnancy was also identified as a reason for child marriage, as well as poor academic performance and dismissal from schools. Among the families created through child marriage, we found widespread domestic violence, including neglect of the child-bride's health and subsistence needs.

Recommendations to reduce incidents of bride kidnapping and child marriage:

- Based on international and national legal commitments, the government of Kyrgyzstan should adopt a comprehensive multi-sectoral national strategy to stop early and forced marriages, make financial resources available to implement it and monitor its implementation.
- State authorities should ensure that existing legislation on child, forced and religious marriages is implemented, including through the allocation of resources for the investigation, prosecution and conviction of perpetrators. Legislation should be strengthened to introduce criminal liability for accomplices.
- Governmental and non-governmental duty bearers should acknowledge the needs for medical, psychosocial, legal and other services for the survivors of child and forced marriages. Resources should be made available to be able to more effectively address the needs of survivors, and enhance the capacities and awareness of service providers on violence against women and gender equality.
- Governmental and non-governmental duty bearers should reinforce efforts to increase public awareness of the negative effects of forced and early marriage, through public information campaigns, school programs, and media programming.

This report demonstrates that bride abduction and child marriage are complex, multi-faceted and nuanced phenomena, which must be understood as dependent upon the context in which they occur and which allows them to take place. We must treat these practices as products of the larger social system and gender order which dictate norms and standards of accepted behaviour for men and women, and of the work of the formal and informal

institutions. Bride kidnapping and child marriage are both extensions of the patriarchal mechanisms of power which are taken for granted and are sidelined by various relevant institutions. Every participant brings their own contribution to these acts of violence, in a sort of social assembly line of actions which together lead to a blatant violation of women's rights to a free choice of husband, to a life free of violence and exploitation, and to independence and personal empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

This report is an in-depth examination of two forms of gender-based violence endemic in the Kyrgyz Republic: bride kidnapping and child marriage. Globally, research on child marriage has recognised it as a gender-based phenomenon with different consequences for boys and girls. For girl spouses their personal development and wellbeing are endangered. Due to the inherently unequal power relations in child marriages, these girls are disempowered, dependent upon their husbands and in-laws, and deprived of their fundamental rights to education, professional development and independence. They are highly susceptible to domestic and sexual violence, as well as dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Having limited access to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty (UNFPA, 2012). At an international level, it is recognized that any state which fails to address child marriage “undervalues the contribution of young women and limits its own possibilities [...fosters drainage] of the innovation and potential that would enable them to thrive” (Girls Not Brides, 2016).

The Kyrgyz Republic recognises child marriage (formal or informal marriage before the age of eighteen) to be a serious violation of human rights and the rights of the child through its formal commitment to relevant international treaties and agreements and through its national legislation including the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. In 2013 sentences for bride kidnapping were increased to up to ten years in prison.¹ In 2016 religious marriages were banned as alternatives to civil unions, and in early 2017 a law was passed to improve protection for survivors of domestic violence.

The new legislation is a real attempt to address a problem that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in a 2015 report flagged, saying that it was “deeply concerned about the persistent abduction of women and girls for forced marriages, notwithstanding the amendments to the Criminal Code which criminalize bride kidnapping and provide for increased sanctions.” According to the CEDAW report between 2008-2015 there had only been one conviction for bride kidnapping and “bride kidnapping appears to be socially legitimized and surrounded by a culture of silence and impunity” (CEDAW, 2015). According to participants in a UN sponsored meeting of parliamentarians in Kyrgyzstan, only three cases were opened on bride kidnapping in 2015 and none of them went to court (UNDP, 2016).

The number of women who have been kidnapped to become brides is difficult to determine accurately due to the stigma and other societal factors that make reporting difficult. Nearly 12,000 young

women and girls are thought to be kidnapped for marriage each year according to the Women’s Support Centre in Kyrgyzstan (Taylor, 2017). According to the UNFPA Gender in Society Perception Study: national survey results, the national prevalence is 22 percent. In a 2017 report by Charles Becker, Bakhrom Mirkasimov and Susan Steiner, they quote figures that suggest that between 16 and 23 percent of women in Kyrgyzstan are abducted for marriage. The study also found that the practice is mainly limited to ethnic Kyrgyz, and that kidnapped brides tend to be younger than those in love marriages or arranged marriages, with 19 being the mean age (Becker, 2017).

Available criticism points to ineffective implementation of the law, which is often explained by state officials’ reluctance to interfere with what they perceive as private issues (UNFPA, 2012). Other sources indicate the problem of laws not being sufficiently enforced or provision being made for dispensations. To specify, exceptions exist in the national legislation under which an under-age individual can be considered to reach the age of majority before the biological age of eighteen and, consequently, be married at a younger age². Forcing into marriage, or entering de facto marital relations with, a person younger than seventeen is a criminal offence. However, provisions do not exist for prosecution if such a marriage is based on consent by the child or by the child’s parents/legal

From the academic point of view, scholarly sources about the practices of child marriage in Kyrgyzstan are lacking. The recent study by UNICEF’s international household survey initiative, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey research (MICS),

¹ Bride kidnapping has been illegal since the 1920s when it was banned in the Soviet Union.

provides some important insights in this area, but calls for more “multidisciplinary, quantitative and qualitative” research to further inform effective policy intervention.

It is also globally recognised that child marriages look different from one country to another, and from one community to the next (UNFPA, 2012). Therefore, solutions and policy response must be local and contextual. This requires knowledge and understanding of local, contextualised practices which can only be gained from an in-depth analysis of the situation on the ground. How child marriages take place in the Kyrgyz Republic is not yet sufficiently known and understood because little local research has been conducted on the topic. Any methodology used needs to be appropriate to study what is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, occurring within various social contexts and influenced by gender norms, interpersonal relationships, economic, social and political histories, etc. These experiences cannot be understood in a purely quantitative manner, divorced from their context, but must be supplemented with a more holistic approach which focuses on the perspectives of the participants themselves. However, according to UNICEF, no specific research has been conducted so far that focuses exclusively on the scale, reasons and consequences of early marriage in the Kyrgyz Republic. This lack of empirically based data makes it difficult to plan an effective policy agenda and intervention programme. This GSPS research is a response to this situation and adds to existing data by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis regarding child marriage practices from the perspective of various actors directly and indirectly involved in perpetuating them. We provide space for their voices to be heard and behaviours better understood as part of larger social systems and cultural contexts. We also analyse the perceived risks and predicted advantages of their involvement.

2 Two clauses in the Civil Code allow this to occur. Article 56 of the Civil Code stipulates it as following, “if the person under 18 years of age enters marriage, permitted by law and a court has not declared the marriage invalid”. The Article 62, Civil Code states the case of ‘emancipation’, whereby a person under 18 years is considered fully capable under the law if that person is working under a labor contract or is, with the agreement of legal representatives, conducts entrepreneurial activities. A clause to Article 14 (Marriageable Age) of the Family Code of the Kyrgyz Republic stipulates that the legal age of marriage can be lowered by one year under special dispensations (called ‘the good reasons’) and with approval from local government on the basis of the decision by the Commission on Family and Child Support Departments. In practical terms, these clauses allow individuals as young as seventeen years old to marry with the same legal rights as those who are eighteen and older.

3 <http://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa%20kyrgyzstan%20overview.pdf>

Harmful traditional practices can often be linked to each other. In Kyrgyzstan, child marriages often occur as a result of bride kidnapping. Bride kidnapping (ala kachuu) is the officially banned criminal act of abducting a woman to forcefully marry her. It is reported to be one of the most common forms of forced marriage in Kyrgyzstan (Thomas, 2009). Historically, these practices have been used by consenting couples in order to get around financial or social constraints which otherwise would prevent them marrying (Thomas, 2009). While such consensual “fake abductions” still occur, the frequency of violent bride kidnapping has risen significantly since the end of the communist era. To be specific, 45% of Kyrgyz women in 2004 were forced to marry as a result of bride kidnapping, compared to 33% in 1999 (Ibraeva, 2011). Scholars and activists have made the case for non-consensual bride kidnapping to be recognised as a gross violation of fundamental human rights, the Kyrgyz Civil Law, and Islamic Law. Previous research has shown that ala kachuu was uncommon prior to the Soviet period, meaning that it is no longer seen as an “old tradition”, but rather as a breach of the Kyrgyz traditional law of “adat” (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007).

Human Rights Watch Report (2006) produced a description of the process of non-consensual kidnapping of women in Kyrgyzstan which we make use of in this report:

Kidnappings of women and girls – some as young as 12 years old – for forced marriage are carried out by groups of men who capture a woman through physical force or deception and take her to the home of the intended groom. The abductor’s family then exerts psy-hological, and sometimes physical, pressure to coerce the young woman to consent to marry. (p. 31)

We also use Borbieva (2012) to elaborate on this image:

... his female relatives sequester her in a room and try to convince her to put on a white jooluk. By putting on the jooluk, she signals her acceptance of the marriage. The women are not supposed to force her to put it on, nor should they put it on her themselves. Rather, with words—both sweet and harsh—they try to get her to agree to the marriage. This will not be easy, however. Even if the kidnapping was an elopement instigated by the bride, she must perform resistance. At the groom’s house, she must weep, fight, and try to escape. This performance is one way she asserts her honour; local convention holds that a woman should not publicly show eagerness to marry. (p. 146)

Borbieva (2012)'s account of what happens next describes the expected actions of the parents of the groom and those of the bride:

While the women of the household are with the kidnapped woman, news of the abduction is sent to her family. The parents of the kidnapped woman often have final say in the outcome of a kidnapping. If it is clear their daughter does not want to be there, and if they have concerns about the reputation or socioeconomic status of the kidnapping family, they may give her permission to leave. More often, however, they will tell her to stay. Often, a woman who does not want to marry her kidnapper will stay to marry her kidnapper if her parents so wish. After all the parties have expressed agreement, an imam (cleric) will be summoned to perform the Islamic marriage ceremony, and the couple will begin living together as husband and wife. (p. 146)

The Human Rights Watch Report (2006) on Kyrgyzstan includes analysis of the possibility of escape for the kidnapped women:

In some cases the young woman is raped soon after being taken to the abductor's house, so that she will feel shame and feel unable to return to her parents' home; other times the kidnapped woman is coerced to have sex or in some cases is raped on her wedding night, after a marriage ceremony is performed. (p. 31)

Rape of the abducted woman is used to make the marriage irreversible and shame her into staying. But even if the woman is not raped, social stigma gives her little choice but to stay with the abductor's family. Social constraints include the expectation that women are virgins when they marry. If she escapes, she could face disgrace and become ostracised by her community and family because of the suspicion that she has had sexual intercourse. This will create difficulty for her in building a new life and finding a different husband.

Women who are kidnapped often suffer physical as well as psychological and emotional trauma. Continued domestic violence throughout the marriage is often. These women are frequently forced to work as unpaid servants for their in-laws. They must endure restrictions on their freedom of movement, ownership rights, right to education, right to work and right to be free from forced labour (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2008), as well as to their rights to "liberty and security of person, and right to life and physical integrity", especially if it involves battery and/or rape (UNFPA, 2006 in Thomas, 2009, p. 3). In addition a study, published in the journal *Demography*, also said babies born to kidnapped brides weighed 80 to 190 grammes less than those from arranged marriages. Smaller birth

weights have been linked to a higher risk of disease, lower education rates and earnings, it said (Becker, 2017).

The reasons for the increased rate of bride kidnapping in the Kyrgyz Republic have been discussed by different scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. They have advanced several sociological explanations, such as: kidnapping is perceived to be a positive Kyrgyz cultural identity marker, one denied under Soviet rule (Handrahan, 2007); kidnapping mediates the tensions caused by different understandings of love and marriage that arise between young people and elders within their families (Borbieva, 2012); kidnapping helps men assert control over female mobility and sexuality in an increasingly destabilized world (Werner, 2009). Others have emphasized economic factors, noting that the post-Soviet increase in subsistence farming left poor, rural families in need of extra workers – young wives and children (Ibraeva et. al., 2011). More recent analysis of bride kidnapping has also looked at it as indicative of systemic misogynistic patriarchy, here enacted through everyday terrorism (Cooper-Cunningham, 2016).

There is no consensus on which theory best explains the phenomenon. Nor has there been any empirical basis established for many of the scholarly claims made about bride kidnapping's underlying causes. Instead, arguments have been made for the need for follow-up research. One of the most renowned scholars and researchers of bride kidnapping, Russel Kleinbach (2007), recommended further research on *alokachuu* that would delve more deeply into feelings, motivations, beliefs, expectations, etc., of all players involved in the practice. He encouraged more research on the dynamics of parental consent both before and after kidnapping and the differences in men's and women's feelings of love (if any). A deeper exploration of the attitudes and beliefs of the bride and groom, particularly in terms of their expectations from marriage and partnership was also indicated. Similarly, little attention has been paid to the rationales, understandings and beliefs of kidnapped women themselves. At the same time, pressure exists on the Kyrgyz government to work towards eradication of those practices recognised as harmful for women and girls' wellbeing. About a year ago, the CEDAW Committee and Committee on the Rights of the Child once again raised the issues of bride kidnapping and under-age marriage in their address to the Kyrgyz Republic, emphasising the urgent need for the government to redress these practices through research on their underlying causes and the development of comprehensive strategies to address them.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report on violence against women and girls in the Kyrgyz Republic focuses on two widespread non-consensual marriage practices: bride abduction and child marriage. It has the following objectives:

- To establish empirically based knowledge about ala kachuu and early-age marriage in the Kyrgyz Republic, with an understanding of the contextual aspects of these practices.
- To explore ethnographically what people with various experiences, different familial statuses (including age and gender) and diverse community roles know about child marriage and bride kidnapping; What their attitudes are towards these practices and what have been their roles and involvement in relation to these practices; What feelings and expectations they hold when they participate or refuse to participate in perpetuating child marriage and bride kidnapping.
- To investigate how different players are impacted by ala kachuu and child marriage and how they adapt to the situations caused by these practices.
- To identify areas for possible action for effective, context-specific prevention policy and programmes.

Qualitative data collection took place in rural and urban areas within all seven regions (oblasts) and two major cities (Bishkek and Osh) of the Kyrgyz Republic. Data was collected from a total of fiftyseven research locales, villages, small towns, larger cities and micro-districts within the cities. 121 interviews were conducted in urban and semi-urban areas; 246 interviews were held in rural settings. Twenty-one case studies were done in urban areas; thirty-two case studies took place in villages and semi-urban settings. The selection of research locales was motivated by the intention to be as broadly representative as possible, as well as by availability of willing participants.

The data collection process started at the beginning of February 2016 and continued until the end of March 2016. A total of eight well-qualified and experienced field researchers worked in two research teams consisting of four people (one working in the north and the second team working in the south of the country). Such a division was necessary to ensure process' efficiency. Prior to departing to the field

sites, the research teams participated in a seminar, where they discussed issues of research ethics, safety and trauma for researchers, and tested the research tool. After the pilot stage, and subsequent discussion of the process, data collection began.

Two major methods were used for data collection: case studies and expert interviews. Using case studies helped investigate the familial contexts in which ala kachuu and child marriage occur, whereas expert interviews were used to better capture wider cultural, institutional, legal, political, economic, historical, etc., circumstances wherein these practices take place. Semi-structured in-depth interviewing was used to explore individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences. In expert interviews, areas of possible policy action were also identified. Ethnographic observation was also part of the data collection procedure.

Due to the sensitive and private nature of the topic, focus group discussions were not used in this pillar. It was important to win the trust of the respondents to gain in-depth understanding of their experiences and an individual, face-to-face approach was the best suited to this.

Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit participants based on specific screening criteria and often in close consultation with community leaders. Case study interviews typically took place in the homes of the women and their relatives. Sometimes, for reasons of privacy, respondents were invited to give interviews inside the project team's car. Expert interviews typically took place in their offices. Each interview started with introductory statements and the obtaining of informed consent. Interviews were complemented with debriefing notes and ethnographic observations about the context in which the interviews took place, i.e., the interior, the atmosphere, any unexpected circumstances, and the overall everyday respondents' reality. Each interview was coded for ethical purposes, with clearly identifiable personal details being removed.

A total of 367 interviews comprise the data pool. They include twenty-one case studies of bride kidnapping, twenty-one case studies of early marriage and eleven

mixed case studies (in total 266 interviewed individuals) as well as 101 expert interviews. One case of polygamy (and under-age marriage), one case of underage widowhood and three cases of divorce are part of the data pool. The number of completed case studies in each location in each category also ranged from one to four. The number of interviewees in each case study varied, with the maximum number of

participants reaching eleven people. Each case study focused on the life of a woman who has lived through a child marriage or bride kidnapping or both. During her interview, other relevant participants were identified and interviews with them were subsequently requested. There were a number of failed case studies in which respondents changed their mind at the last minute and refused to have information on their cases included in the GSPS.



RESEARCH FINDINGS
BRIDE KIDNAPPING

RESEARCH FINDINGS

BRIDE KIDNAPPING

The prevalence of the harmful and illegal practices of *ala kachuu* and child marriage throughout the country is considerable. Although this research does not attempt to give quantitative estimations of their prevalence, the most recent national quantitative research carried out by the UNFPA and the NSC (2016)⁴ shows that bride kidnapping happens in all parts of Kyrgyzstan. To specify, 60% of marriages in Talas Oblast were the result of *ala kachuu*. In Issyk-Kul oblast this number was 45%, in Dzhahal-Abad and Naryn Oblasts it ranged from 28% to 31%. Non-consensual *ala kachuu* accounted for 20% of all marriages (UNFPA & NSC, 2016). The highest rates of explicitly non-consensual *ala kachuu* were found in Naryn and Osh oblasts, and in the cities of Osh and Bishkek. The rate of *ala kachuu* in rural areas was found to be 1.7-1.8 times higher than in urban districts.

A vast majority of respondents (about 80%) in the quantitative survey carried out by UNFPA and the NSC, expressed explicitly negative attitudes to bride kidnapping. More than half of the respondents believed that non-consensual bride kidnapping has decreased over the last five years, while 4 % reported an increase. The urban population was twice as likely to note an increase in bride kidnapping (UNFPA & NSC, 2016). About 70% of respondents (both women and men) were aware of the legal consequences of *ala kachuu* (UNFPA & NSC, 2016). More than 40% of all respondents knew what the criminal penalty is (i.e. three to ten years of prison). The highest rate of awareness was found in Talas oblast (more than 80 %) and the lowest in Naryn oblast (slightly less than 50%). However, 10 % of the respondents justified *ala kachuu* as a “tradition,” 25% believed that kidnapped women must marry the kidnapper, less than half were actually ready to accept such a relative back into the family. Such different points of view demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to study it in depth.

There is a public perception that the incidence of child marriage has increased in the last few years. This observation confirms the available statistics, which indicate a clear increase of both early-age marriage and teenage pregnancy and the ubiquity of the latter (UNFPA & NSC, 2016). In addition, incidence of child marriage was found to be 2.5 times higher in rural areas than in the cities (UNFPA & NSC, 2016).

These practices have profoundly negative impacts upon women’s lives. Their physical and psychological health, as well as their financial and economic independence, is affected, as are their opportunities

for educational and professional development. Domestic violence is common, while quality of life is generally low. In addition to investigating from the perspective of those directly inciting and enduring these practices, the research also included those involved less directly. On this basis, the research found that *ala kachuu* and child marriage affects not only the brides but also members of their families and communities. The effect may be negative but for some actors there are straightforward benefits in the undertaking of, contributing to and perpetuation of *ala kachuu* and child marriage.

The issue of individual choice and informed decision-making is worthy of discussion. Child marriage and, even more so, *ala kachuu* appear to be largely the consequence of a chain of smaller routine and taken-for-granted actions, carried out by separate individuals in a specific sequence. Orchestration of these practices seems to be ideological, interlinked, and difficult to distil down to ‘one single evil individual’. Carrying out specific tasks and roles are contingent upon the age, gender, family status and other characteristics of individual participants.

Both *ala kachuu* and child marriage take place and are part of a gender order characterized by patriarchal power relations. Victims of *ala kachuu* and child marriage are objectified, but other participants are also objectified by the social and cultural system around them. We can see that there is a taken-for-granted expansive gender ideology which works to reify and perpetuate these practices, but which is obscured by benevolent rhetoric. The control of women’s sexuality is a central underlying theme in much of the collected data. Before being married, young women are seen not

⁴ GSPS National Quantitative study conducted by the UNFPA and National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

as individuals in their own right but as a potential bride/captive/ source of free labour and therefore objectified. As such they are symbolic carriers of family honour or a potential bringer of shame. A system of social surveillance is imposed on women to ensure that they are suitably prepared for marriage and family life. Once married, social control does not cease but acquires different features, where women are assessed by various indicators, such as number of children she produces, relationships with her mother-in-law, cleanliness of her house, etc. Her wellbeing will depend upon how she is assessed.

Linguistically, such a reductionist approach to women is especially evident. The choice of words, expressions, and ways of referring to young women demonstrate this objectification. For example respondents used the words 'to rot' (портиться) and to become 'rotten' (испортиться) in reference to young girls (in Kyrgyz). Respondents used this expression to denote something that must be avoided at all costs, given the high value placed on the supposed virtues of naivety and innocence among potential wives. The expression implies that a girl may "get ideas" and stop taking for granted traditional norms and lifestyles. A rotten girl (испорченная) may also be an enlightened individual who, having been exposed to an alternative lifestyle via TV, the Internet and visiting urban areas, has learnt about alternatives and women's choices. A rotten girl is an unmarriageable girl, the worst that can happen to a woman. Much of the motivation behind *ala kachuu* and child marriage is linked to the fear of having a rotten daughter or marrying one. Consequently, as our informants frequently explained, actions are undertaken to avoid such a situation and have a girl married off before this can happen. Here is one bride speaking of how she was married off by her grandmother, who feared her becoming "rotten":

My grandmother took care of me better than my mum. My grandmother bought me everything I wanted to get, but she never allowed me to attend any parties, she used to say: "If you watch TV, you can see there is violence everywhere". Thus, my grandma didn't allow me to study. I wanted to learn sewing but my grandma told me that the city was a bad place; you know, people from old generation are very protective. My grandma used to watch TV shows, like TV show "Shock and Fact" and she used to berate me: "See, what can happen to girls, if anything happens to you, how I will find you?" So, I always agreed with whatever

she would say and I couldn't continue my education and then a woman appeared who helped my husband to kidnap me..." (A bride, a village in Osh oblast)

Conceptualised as something that can go rotten, the girls are treated as dehumanised objects which can be given and taken. Expressions such as "kyz aldyk" or "kyz berdik" ("we took a girl", "we gave away a girl"), are used in reference to women and never in relation to young men. For example, a mother-in-law in Dzhahalal-Abad described how they went to choose a bride for her son, saying that she asked, "Hey, how about this one? Do you like it? Yes. Ok, then let's kidnap her." This indicates an objectifying attitude towards women, a process resembling impulse shopping. In another case of bride kidnapping, confusion arose due to the same name being shared by two different girls and the wrong individual was kidnapped. The mother of the bride recalls:

My older daughter [Gulnara] worked in the birthing house. There were two Gulnaras. One of the men was asked to find Gulnara, he called "Gulnara!" and my daughter responded and so they kidnapped my daughter instead of a different girl." (City of Osh).

This last case is especially striking because it shows how easily women are considered replaceable as brides. This is yet another confirmation of a dehumanising attitude.

The term *kelin* which literally translates as "daughter-in-law" or "bride" embodies much more than just a relational concept. As Reeves (2004) states it, *kelin* "can be used generically to refer to young women who are "in" but not "of" a given household". The term derives from the root *kel-*, *kelmeq*, which means "to come." It describes someone who "was taken and brought." The common expression "*kelin aldyk*" which translates as "we took a bride" is a typical substitute for "our son got married." A *kelin* tends to be measured in terms of the quality of her domestic work, submission to in-laws and reproductive effectiveness. Harshly put, she can be reduced to the function of an incubator of offspring and the provision of free domestic labour. In nearly all the interviews in which respondents wanted to describe their *kelins* in positive terms they would emphasize their domestic skills and the number of children they produced:

Such village girls don't need to be told anything. They know it already, when to bake bread, when to clean, when to cook. (A mother-in-law speaking about her kelin, a village in Batken)

We noticed it right away, from the first day, that my kelin is a good housekeeper because she grew up with her grandmother. A girl who takes care of an older person is different. She did everything herself without directions. I was very satisfied. Now, good God, her children have grown, her older son is in the second grade in school, the middle one goes to kindergarten and the little one is slightly older than two. We are thinking about a kindergarten for him as well. (A mother-in-law, a village in Chui oblast)

Ala kachuu and child marriage can therefore be described as extensions of the existing social, political and cultural system, dominated by a particular gender order supported by formal and informal institutions.

Ala kachuu is comparable to a relay race with actors carrying out specific behavioural roles and passing the baton from one to another. It inevitably requires

the involvement of at least a few people. It is a staged performance, a comedy for some, a drama for others, but not a one-man play. The actions of various participants in ala kachuu are often almost mechanical (“everyone does it”) but not something that “just happens.” People who take part tend to think of themselves as “benevolent actors” who act on behalf of and for the good of the bride, or groom, or the family. Individual perspectives differ and include highly personal issues and expectations of benefits. This might include maintaining the status quo or an increase in social status, etc. In the majority of cases, subjective experiences are conflicting, because any chosen strategy, i.e., participation, non-participation, intervention or confrontation, carries definite social, financial, and psychological risks, which are described further in this report. In most cases, however, the envisaged benefits of involvement in ala kachuu outweigh the risks.

2.1

THE VOICE OF THE WOMEN

Much of the data on ala kachuu coincides with that on child marriage, i.e., most of the kidnapped brides are younger than eighteen years old. Therefore, our analysis in this section is applicable to women who went through bride kidnapping, as well as child marriage via bride kidnapping. Findings which relate to child marriage which happened in ways other than ala kachuu will be presented in a separate section of the report.

Within the UNFPA and NSC (2016) study, 80 % of all women condemned ala kachuu as an act, and 60 % of all women personally condemned the kidnapper. In the interviews, women shared some of the negative effects of bride kidnapping on the lives of the kidnapped:

Zhanara⁵ was only seventeen years old. She just finished the school and my husband wanted her to go to the university. She wrote poems and was very good at languages. When she studied in school she would write poems... [Zhanara was kidnapped and never went to the university] (Chui Oblast, aunt of the victim, primary caregiver of the bride prior to her being kidnapped)

My dream had been to live my life, that I would study, learn a profession. (A fourteen-year-old bride, a city in Chui oblast)

In my mind was to work and to pass exams to study. I wanted to really make an effort to study in a university. (A victim of bride kidnapping, a village in Osh oblast)

One more quote from a woman who married very young is so full of bitterness and regret:

Even if a young girl wants to get married and everybody around her supports it, I won't support it. Right now, sometimes when guys call my younger sister on phone or text her via WhatsApp I immediately berate her, I tell my younger sister, do you want to get your head into “turmush” already?! I tell my sister, look at the word “turmush” itself, it says “tur” and “mush”(In the Kyrgyz language “tur” means “to stand up” and “mush” means the “fist”), which in sum means if you stand up the fist will beat you up, in other words it means that if you will get married, marriage will beat you up. (A bride, city of Batken)

⁵ All names of the respondents have been changed

This is not to say that marriage was not part of these women's plans. It was most likely what they imagined to be the happiest moment in their lives. But they wanted to get married in a way they describe as 'normal', in contrast to what actually happened to them. "I wanted to marry in a normal way", "I never thought this would happen to me, I was sure that in my life everything would happen in a normal way", "I wanted everything to be normal, to have a normal wedding", are sentences which appear repeatedly in the interviews with the brides.

Ala kachuu was an unexpected, cruel and humiliating life-changing event. As one woman described emotionally:

The guys arrived and forcefully dragged me into their car. Almost from my bed. It was winter and they dragged me, I did not even have shoes on, I had one sock on only. Five guys grabbed me and pushed me into the car. I had a boyfriend at that time and I

wanted to marry him [at this point she burst into tears]. When they forced me to sit behind the curtain, they dragged me there. I hid myself in the corner and tried to run away, I was covering my head with my hands and begged them not to put the headscarf on me, I begged them to let me go and study. But they threatened me with a curse. (A kidnapped bride, a village in Talas oblast).

Ala kachuu is an extremely stressful event for the victims which may cause severe psychological damage. On an emotional level they felt betrayed and reported shock, numbness, anxiety, fear, guilt, depression, anger, a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, and grief. On the cognitive level, their reactions included confusion, impaired memory, decreased concentration, denial and even intrusive thoughts (frightening and unwelcome thoughts about destructive actions one can do to oneself or others, including killing). In terms of behaviour, withdrawal was common as well as being on edge.

Case Study #1:

[Ala kachuu survivor: A story of violence and divorce] City of Osh

Norida is a twenty-nine-year-old woman with a university degree in financial accounting who is raising three young children of seven, four and one years old. In 2007 when Norida had just started her second year of university she was kidnapped by a man whom she had only seen once before. Even though more than eight years has passed she can remember the details of that day:

19th of September was my father's birthday and I left my work early to go and prepare food. I was in a hurry going home and saw him (the groom) outside waiting for me. He told me that my aunt sent him to help me. I got into the car without thinking. I was so young...When I realised what was going on, I told him that I would not marry men like him. At these words he turned the car towards his village. In the car there was one more friend and the driver. I was alone, I cried, I was crying all the way, I was calling my mum, «Mum, Mum» and cried. I thought that I should stop crying and wasting my energy because I was sure I would not stay, I was sure that I would come back home and not stay there. His friends were so rude, they forced me to sit down and to be quiet, yelled at me, «you will not go anywhere! Sit down and be quiet!» They held me really tightly and

then forced me out of the car and dragged me into the house. His parents and one 'dzhene' had been waiting, they brought me into the house and I told them that I would not stay and that they should let me go. I did not put on the headscarf. They went to tell my parents and returned the next day with my 'dzhene' and told me that my parents agreed...So, I allowed them to put the headscarf on out of despair. I later learnt that my parents, in fact, did not give their permission...They came to my parents at two in the night. My father did not go out to meet them, until they lay down in the street. Only at six in the morning the came out to them and they took it as his agreement. They sent my 'dzhene' and after that I put on the headscarf.

I did not want to see him. Even after I was told that my parents agreed I could not believe that I would really have to marry him and live with him. I was so stressed. Then the 'nikah' took place and I had to go to bed with him. I was scared of it. He was eight years older and I was so angry with him. On the first night he did everything forcefully as if he wanted to say, «that's it, you must sleep in this house». He held me really tight and when he was done I passed out. 'Dzhenes' came in and gave me hot tea with raspberry jam, washed my face. After that I could

not bear lying by his side. For about twenty days, I did not allow him to touch me. Because he was so cruel the first night, I was so afraid of the bed. When we moved to the city he raped me again and again.

I learnt that he had kidnapped another girl two days before he kidnapped me and she did not stay in his house and he felt ashamed and needed to bring another girl by any means and as soon as possible because preparation for celebrations had been made and they had just renovated their house. I learnt about this three months later when I was already pregnant.

[...]

He started to raise his hand to me two months after marriage; he accused me of not sleeping with him like a normal woman. He drunk, did not take care of his looks, he just lay around at home. I should have told my parents. I told them nothing, I hid it but

after he started beating me up every day, after our son was born, I told my parents and they took me home. I thought «that is it! », but my in-laws came to our house every day to make peace and we decided to try again. It did not work and after another year and a half we divorced again. By then I had three children...

Ultimately, Norida managed to obtain her university degree and managed to escape the abusive situation. She now lives at her parents' place together with her children, younger brother and his family. She regrets that she lost some precious time: "I did not have plans to get married. I was on my way to getting my university degree, I was promoted at work, I had so many plans... I am now really behind." Nevertheless, she plans to return to work after her youngest child grows older.

2.2

DISGUISED AND UNDISGUISED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The cult of virginity is strikingly evident in all cases; the proof of virginity must be demonstrated in most instances and in some cases may take extreme forms. Some severe cases of sexual violence cannot be omitted here. Norida's case, described above, is one such story. In Osh oblast one of the kidnapped women was sexually tortured; she passed out and later had to be taken to a surgeon with multiple and severe vaginal tears. The relatives of the groom tried to explain the torture as necessary in order to produce as much blood as possible so that it could be shown to other people.

Our data show that in the cases of forced ala kachuu sexual activity which happens during the first (as well as subsequent) nights cannot be classified as consensual sex but should be classified as rape. The power relations in this situation are ostensibly unequal and refusing sexual advances bears too many costs for the women. A completed nikah, the parents' approval, public expectations, etc., are used as legitimizing factors but these women's vulnerability are employed to force them to have sex with their kidnappers. Ala kachuu takes advantage of women, who are disoriented, often in a state of acute stress and shock. Their will and independence are fragile, strength for resistance is undermined, and

decisionmaking is often complicated. Emotional and psychological exhaustion along with massive social pressure impairs their ability for good judgment. In these circumstances their consent must be accepted and treated as forced. The fact that this happens with the approval of the girls' parents, with remarkable levels of expected and socially endorsed external interference, and the requirement to produce (enough) virginal blood collected in the correct way, makes this rape especially cruel. This is organised rape which is carried out in a collective fashion, where someone exerts psychological pressure, someone else emotionally exhausts the woman, another leads her to the bedroom, the groom does his part of the act, etc.



From top:
GSPS respondent, a kidnapped at her 20 bride, is playing with her youngest child, who was born after she divorced her kidnapper. © UN Women/Elyor Nematov

Now she and her children live at her parent's house in Osh city. © UN Women/Elyor Nematov

The UNFPA & NSC (2016) study show that more than half of all respondents believe that kidnapped women who were forced to engage in sex with their kidnappers must report being raped to law enforcing bodies. However, only 30% of them expressed willingness to actually accept their own female relatives in such a situation back home. Sadly, considerable percentage, 25% of women and nearly 30% of men, believe that victims of kidnapping must marry their rapists. This answer is twice as widespread among rural population.

1. Attempted resistance, failed resistance:

The national survey by the UNFPA and NSC (2016) provide impressive data in relation to public opinion about the kidnapped women. Nearly every fifth respondent believe that a kidnapped woman must stay and marry the kidnapper. The strength of this belief is contingent upon the level of education in reverse correlation, i.e., the less years of education, the stronger the agreement with this statement is. Among the reasons for such a conviction the respondents mentioned community disapproval (39%), women's naturalised need to submit to the will of men (34 % of men and 25 % of women), and difficulties in marrying someone else later (24 %).

The women in captivity actively resist their situation once they realise what is going on. They scream, plead, fight, and threaten. The description below is just one example of the kind of resistance women may attempt:

I went to work as usual. My mother was sick and I worked in the bazaar. At noon he invited me to a cafe and I refused. I understood that they were trying to kidnap me and I started to run away. I got into a marshrutka and went home and they started chasing me with a car. As soon as I got off they kidnapped me. My house was the fourth one from the road and they kidnapped me at the edge of the road. I was scared. While in the marshrutka I called my father. He did not answer the phone for a long time. I lived with one of my brothers at that time and I called him. He came outside to meet me. He came outside and ran towards me but I did not have enough time to reach him. [...] Two of them picked me up and threw me into the car. I hated them; I beat them and kicked the doors of the car. (A bride, a village in Dzhazal-Abad)

The above quote describes the behaviour of an individual which could not more clearly communicate that the person is unwilling to be married. However,

much of these efforts bring no result because any action of resistance within ala kachuu is recognized as part of the ritual and accepted as "zhenskie shtuchki", i.e., "girls' things". There are many different discursive devices which are used to show that a woman's counterstand is normal and to be expected, and should be treated with tolerance but is essentially not to be taken seriously. A saying such as «кыз кылыгы менен "кетем" дейт» ("the girls always say that they will go away") is one illustration. Others include the following:

She kept saying that she would not get out of the car; you know, these are women's things. If she does not behave like this, it is not interesting either." (A groom, a village in Dzhazal-Abad oblast)

Even if the girl likes the guy, she will still say "No". All girls do it the same way so that the guys have to persuade them. (A groom, Batken oblast)

When she was brought to the house and she started to cry and weep, you know, girls do it. (A groom, city of Osh)

Women's resistance and confrontation is actually perceived as an expression of their consent, being seen as an integral part of the process. Calm and receptive behaviour, on the other hand, may evoke suspicions about the possible "rotteness" of the girl. When resistance and even fighting are conceptualized as a "part of the game" it is nearly impossible to break through. It is extremely difficult for the girl to leave the house of the kidnapper's family without being seriously penalized and shamed. Powerful mechanisms of psychological pressure are used very effectively. The narrative of shame is one; uyat bolot:

We told her, "you will live here, if you go - uyat bolot - it will be shame for you, you have stepped over our threshold, if you go away, your reputation will be destroyed forever, people will talk about you. (A mother of the groom, Chui oblast)

The fear that her refusal can destroy any attempts for her to marry again has considerable effect. Especially, if the women's age is considered to be 'old', as one woman who stayed explains, "they told me that it was time for me to get married, that I was already nineteen. If I was eighteen that would be still young..." (A bride, a village in Osh oblast). The narrative of "all women go through this and live good lives" was also frequently expressed.

Strong pressure is exerted when the girls' pity and

empathy is deliberately manipulated, as in, “Kainene (mother in law) started crying, she was a sickly woman and I stayed”. Inevitability is another strong factor which, when used together with strident glorification of the in-laws and their families can appeal to the rational thinking of the girls: “You will end up in a house like this. Think about this, this is a good family, parents are good people, and the boy is really good!” (Mother-in-law, city of Osh). Guilt and imposition of guilt is also a very powerful manipulation instrument. In explaining how they had come to agree to stay, the women remembered being told, “Look around, everything is ready, the celebration is underway, we have all come to meet you as our daughter, the tables are laid... (a bride describing how she was convinced to stay, a village in Chui oblast) or, “If you go you will disgrace our family, people will start talking about us, you will bring shame to your parents. You have younger sisters, they will follow your path.” (A bride, a village in Naryn). Once the girl is coerced to stay and it becomes known, the groom interprets it as yet more evidence that the woman “likes” him.

In these circumstances the risks of leaving the house are high, but the costs of staying are also considerable. Domestic violence was a recurring topic in a large number of interviews. Although our data also show existence of violence-free child marriages and ala kachuu-based marriages. A mother of a bride describes the violence experienced by her daughter, who at that time was fourteen years old and lived in the house of her in-laws:

She told me that he only raised his hand to her once. He slapped her in the face in the presence of his relatives. It was the only time. She got really offended and ran away. But she is easily appeased. She just smiled. He did not apologise, and she calmed herself (Bishkek).

In another instance a young girl committed suicide following her kidnapping. A school director in Issyk-Kul oblast retold the story:

She was my student. She was a very good student and took a red high school diploma [an equivalent of summa cum laude]. Her image is in front of my eyes till now. She killed herself. She was kidnapped and could not live with it. We never thought she would do it. It must have been really hard for her. She was a good athlete, received excellent grades. But she was forced to marry. (A village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

For many interviewed women, divorce was not a sought after solution to an unsuccessful marriage. This might be related to shame. The UNFPA & NSC (2016) study found that 70 % of rural and 50 % of urban population believe that divorce is shameful for both women and for men (62% of rural sample and 44% of urban sample).

2. Factors contributing and preventing the escape

There are factors which severely limit women’s opportunities to resist. Poverty and similar vulnerabilities are such factors. The UNFPA & NSC study (2016) also found that women from the poorest households, those with elementary or no education, are more likely to be kidnapped. Women are likely to understand that their decision to leave the kidnappers’ houses may further jeopardize the already precarious situation of their families. They fear that they will bring even more harm and shame to their families. Such decisions are especially likely if the women have younger siblings whose marriage prospects may also be endangered by their older sisters’ unpopular choice. As an example, we use a quote from an interview with a bride who felt that she had to stay in her unwanted marriage:

“I had to stay. My father drinks. People look down upon us. If I return home now, they will talk about us, about my family. I have younger sisters...” (A kidnapped bride, a village in Dzhalal-Abad).“

Ala kachuu appears also to run in families. “I have four sons and one daughter. All of the kelins were kidnapped and my daughter was kidnapped too”, shared one older respondent. A mother of an ala kachuu victim also provides impressive numbers:

I have seven daughters; I had them all married off. They were all kidnapped. They all live good lives now. Right after school graduation they were kidnapped. I have one son; we have not had him married yet. This is our tradition; we are telling him to kidnap a girl but he does not agree to it. (A village in Batken)

In these families, girls have a high propensity to internalise ala kachuu as a norm and do not see escaping from an unwanted ala kachuu as a real option.

In speaking about the (rare) cases of escape, there appears to be a marked difference among women in terms of their susceptibility. The excerpt below illustrates what we mean:

I am not afraid to be kidnapped. When my older sister was kidnapped, she did not shout, she did not cry, she got into the car, calmly sat down wherever she was asked to and simply waited until our mother came to take her home. She knew that she would not stay in this house and that our mum would help us no matter what. We know that our mum will come and take us home, she has always told us not to worry if this happens and be calm and just call her. So she went and brought my sister home (A sister of a woman who escaped from ala kachuu, city of Osh).

We can see from this exceptional interview that these young women have and draw confidence for resistance from the reassurance and guidance that their parents have provided. In no other interviews have we encountered any evidence of prior and open discussion between parents and daughters about how to behave if they are kidnapped. Parents admit this is their own omission, as summarized in the quote below:

Among us, the Kyrgyz, many girls do not speak with their parents. Especially with mothers they don't speak openly. In the Kyrgyz mentality, girls cannot openly speak with their mothers; they cannot openly discuss their problems. Among us we only ask if she went to school, whether she has eaten, etc. (A mother of the bride, a city in Chui oblast)

In our findings we have data that parents often warn their daughters to be careful not to be kidnapped. But this seems to be the only communication they have. Therefore the responsibility is put on the daughters who are not provided with a sense of confidence that they can trust that their parents will intervene to support them. Moreover, to the parents, bride kidnapping is seen as something that happens to other people but not to them. Their own daughters' kidnapping takes them by surprise.

Parents meanwhile have reactions which are characterized by psychological disturbance, emotional trauma and stress. As a result, their behaviour is often indecisive. Fear of intervening involves questions such as, "What if she won't get married at all, and we would lose the only chance", "What will people say?" etc. A father of three children used a Kyrgyz saying, "кыз сактагыча туз сакта дейт", which literally translates as "a daughter is not a bag of salt to be kept at home", to indicate that one should prefer having all one's daughters married off (Batken oblast).

If a mother decides to intervene and rescue her

daughter, she must accept the risk of being blamed for misbehaving herself:

When she [my daughter] was kidnapped we felt really really bad. Her dad bounced from his chair and we all started to cry, our heads ached. Then, we did not have much choice and got used to this idea. You can't take her back! All you can do is to think and wish her happiness. A girl must be happy in one place only, if I had taken her, nobody would marry her in the future. Nobody marries such kind of girls... So, we were sitting and crying. Our daughter was so young, she would go to grade eleven, would play, and have fun with her peers. We would send her to study. But after such a thing happens you can't do anything. (A village in Batken oblast)

It is worth noting that this quote belongs to a woman who has seven daughters and all of them were kidnapped. Every case of kidnapping was equally unexpected for them.

Mothers are often blamed for their failure to control their daughters and for allowing them to be kidnapped, i.e., for not watching over them closely enough. They feel responsible for the safety of their daughters, as one woman explained, "We must make sure that our daughters are not kidnapped, we must guard and protect them." (City of Batken). Given this attribution of blame, frustrated fathers often respond to the kidnap of their daughters with domestic violence, both verbal and physical. A mother of a child bride shares, "The father yelled at me 'Are you crazy?! The child must study! What do you think you are doing?' " (Mother of the bride, a city in Chui oblast). A mother of the bride in a village in Batken oblast complained that her husband beat her up when he learnt that their daughter had been kidnapped. He blamed her for not preventing it.

Fathers of the brides feel that their ability to intervene throughout the process of ala kachuu is limited. Within the privacy of their own homes their reactions can demonstrate the pain they are experiencing. We often heard from their wives how difficult it was for them:

"Yes, oooooo, he really yelled. He yelled, shouted, swore. He did not agree for a long time, he wanted them to bring her back. I could hardly talk him into leaving her there." (A village in Batken oblast)

Another painful case study must be described here. In the words of a relative of the bride:

Zharkyn was one of five children in a poor family from a distant area in rural Uzbekistan, not far from the village in Dzalal-Abad oblast where she grew up with her grandmother. Her parents saw her as the most talented and capable of their children, and had wanted it to be possible for her to live in a better place and have a better life. They planned for her to receive a university degree and help them when they are old. However, Zharkyn got kidnapped when she was visiting her uncle in Bishkek at the age of seventeen. She never went to college. When the actual kidnapping took place and her parents learnt about it, they rushed to Bishkek from Uzbekistan but "it was too late", the nikah had already happened. Her father, a poor elderly man cried the entire time he was there, mourning his daughter's perspective for the future as well as his own failed plans.

Fathers tended to be less ready to accept the idea that the girls must stay in the place to where she has been brought. But we learnt that despite their loud protests and claims in front of their own families, their discontent is much less commonly voiced outside their own homes. Direct intervention in ala kachuu for them requires courage and strength, persistence and well-developed communication skills, as well as authority and social and family support. It is an extremely difficult undertaking.

Quite an illustrative story was obtained in a village in Batken oblast, where the head of the Court of Aksakals had his daughter kidnapped three times. He used his authority and internal strength to rescue her from two kidnappings but gave up when she was kidnapped for the third time. This is how he explained his decision:

They [different boys] kept kidnapping her and every time I would take her home. After that she would go back to school and get kidnapped again. The last time she was kidnapped and I took her home I told her, 'If you didn't need to study, we would live a peaceful life'. They would not let her study. One and then another one chased her. The last time my patience came to an end, I let it go and married her off. I asked my

daughter, 'Daughter, what should we do? What do you say? I am tired of this all... I better marry you off and free myself from this.'

This happened despite the daughter's plea to take her home and allow her to go to the university. We find this case striking because it shows parental 'fatigue' from having to rescue his daughter numerous times. The emotional work required of him involves shame and guilt, skilful negotiating tactics and making use of his reputation as the main aksakal in the village. A sense of inevitability and hopelessness were expressed in his words, "if not this one [kidnapper], then another one would do it". He understands that his daughter will be under continuous risk of ala kachuu until she gets married and decides to minimise this risk by marrying her off.

The UNFPA and NSC (2016) data show that, on average, more than a third of all respondents are ready to welcome a kidnapped relative back home and to file a complaint to police on her behalf. Asked if they would take active measures to bring a girl home, 27 % of respondents reported that they would do so. The highest proportion of individuals ready to rescue the victims of kidnapping lived in Bishkek (47 % of women and 43 % of men), the city of Osh (45% and 46 %), Chui oblast (46 and 42 %) and Talas oblast (43% and 36 %). However, 24 % of women and 28 % of men would not do anything and would let the woman decide what to do. Regionally, respondents in Naryn oblast were the most likely to do nothing in the case of a relative being kidnapped (41 % of women and 47 % of men). The lowest percentage was in Batken oblast (27% and 28%). It was also found that the lower the economic status of respondents, and the fewer years of education they had had, the more likely they were not to undertake any actions to bring victims home. A considerable percentage of respondents believe that a non-consensually kidnapped bride must marry the kidnapper. This belief is especially widespread in Batken oblast (about 30%), Issyk-Kul oblast (nearly 30%) and among men living in Bishkek (30%).

2.3

THE KIDNAPPER

This section of the report focuses on the discussion of the groom's experiences, feelings, behaviours, evaluations, etc. of the act of *ala kachuu*. Much of this section is based upon the personal stories of individual men. The UNFPA & NSC (2016) study also reveals much diversity in the population's attitude to kidnapping. These data indicate that the vast majority of respondents reported negative attitudes towards the act of bride kidnapping (81 % of women and 78 % of men). A neutral position towards *ala kachuu* was expressed by 11 % of women and 14% of men. Only 5 % of all respondents held positive attitudes. Most of the latter were between 21 and 30 years of age and lived in rural areas in Osh, Dzhahal-Abad and Issyk-Kul oblasts.

Among female respondents, 60% to 92% throughout the country had negative attitudes towards kidnapers, except in Osh oblast, where the figure dropped to only 43 % of women. For men, negative attitudes were less characteristic (from 27% to 73 % depending on the specific oblast), with the exception of Talas oblast where more than 90% of men see kidnapers in a negative light. More than 25 % of all surveyed women and more than 30% of all surveyed men took a neutral position in this regard. However, 12% of women and 18% of men have positive attitudes towards kidnapers.

Respondents indicated a variety of reasons explaining the motivations for men to kidnap their wives. The most frequently reported causes were the fear of competition (30%), fear of being rejected by the woman they liked (24 %) or of being too shy to approach her (21 %), not being able to afford to pay the bride price (18%), or parents insisting on them kidnapping a bride (19%).

Our data support and add to these findings by providing detailed descriptions of the experiences of the grooms from their own perspectives. We begin this section with a description of a bride kidnapping from the words of the groom himself. The event in question took place nearly a decade ago, but its ramifications were definitely still felt at the time of the interview:

I was forced to kidnap her. I do not justify myself. I tried to make friends with her [before marriage], but she was not interested. She was in a hurry either to go to Bishkek or Talas. Once I came to the bus station with flowers to see her off, but she arranged it so that I came too late and she had gone. So, I asked my father and relatives to go to her house to talk to her parents and arrange for the wedding. I bought all the food and her clothes for the celebration, consulted my relatives on the list of things to buy and was preparing fully by

myself. But when my family came to her house her relatives refused because she was not planning on marriage and wanted to study. A friend of mine told me that life was not a game and if I started something I should finish it. I really decided seriously to get married and decided to kidnap her. Two of my friends captured her and dragged her into the car. I had tried to talk with her but she ignored me, I didn't see any other woman as my wife. I kidnapped her and took her home. Then my father came back and he started scolding us in the yard, my friends got scared and ran away, I hid in the trunk of the car. He said I was a bad sheep and not worthy of the family. He said I humiliated him. But I told him that I would fight for her and would not give her away and that she would be happy with me. My father did not talk to me, the relatives of the girl came and there was a fight. In the end the girl stayed in my house. (A village in Talas)

This case of *ala kachuu* the practice of kidnap becomes a very convenient instrument for treating unreciprocated love. It can be seen as a culturally endorsed reaction to rejection and even a socially expected action.

In our other case studies, fear of rejection is a strong motivating factor and *ala kachuu* is perceived as a strategy which helps to reduce this risk to a minimum. This is particularly the case when the status of the potential bride is known to be more prestigious than that of the groom, i.e., she comes from a more financially or socially well-off background. In such cases the chances are high that she would not "even take a look at him" (father of the groom, village in Dzhahal-Abad) if she is given an opportunity to choose.

The case above is nevertheless distinct because it appears to have largely been decided and organized by one man. However this was not common in our data. Our findings show a fair number of empirical

examples where the roles of the grooms are, in fact, limited and their involvement is guided by other people.

Female members of the groom's family, mostly mothers or dzhenes, are typically responsible for the initial idea of and preparation for ala kachuu. Pressure is exerted upon the young men to get married. The deteriorating health of the man's parents is one frequent justification used. Sick parents or other significant family members may express a desire to participate in and witness the marriage of their sons or grandsons, and have an opportunity to see their grandchildren or great grandchildren. This is an older sister of a man speaking about how her brother got married:

He is the youngest among us. He was twenty-two, I can't remember exactly. All his friends already got married. Our mother became sickly and she wanted to see her son marry. We told her, 'Mother, he is too young, let's wait till he turns 28, let him get married after he is 25'. She said: 'No, I want grandchildren' and she would not leave him alone. So, we started looking for a girl, looked for one here and in Dzhahal-Abad, sisters of my mother (taiezhe) were from there. We asked around, and found this kelin, and he married her. (City of Batken).

A young man from a different family tells his own story:

I got married very early. The idea of getting married belonged to my parents because I was the oldest son of the family. My parents didn't tell me whom I should marry. My parents told me that if I had a girlfriend, I should talk to her about marriage. But at that time it wasn't even a year since I graduated from school and I was shy to tell my parents that I didn't have a girlfriend. So I went to another neighbouring village, picked up a girl, whom I liked by her looks and kidnapped her. And now we live happily. (A groom, a village in Osh oblast)

Pressure on the oldest son tends to be particularly strong. The embarrassment of not having a girlfriend and the young age of the groom made ala kachuu a particularly attractive option. Perceived time constraints have been found to be a strong factor for families in initiating ala kachuu. This is especially true for the families where adult sons are also labour migrants. This is how an imam describes the events in his local district or aiyi okmotu:

It is not a lie to say that fifty to sixty % of the Kyrgyz

marry in this way. Why? This is an easy tradition. One can marry really fast. For example, they come back from Russia, they need to marry really fast and go back. We say this way one can marry fast and many people do that. (Dzhahal-Abad oblast).

The need for additional labour around the house is another one. Marriage in such cases is reduced to an act of bringing in cheap labour for the groom's household. One groom explains, "By this time I needed a kelin in the house. At home, you know, I saw that it was difficult for my mum, and I said, 'Let me bring kelin to you', and so I did" (city of Osh). It is important to note his reference to his spouse not as "my wife" but a "kelin", i.e. as someone (or something) acquired specifically for his mother.

The traditional belief in everyone 'needing to get married' is equally strong for young boys and girls. Any unmarried man experiences various kinds of pressures:

When I got married I was the last one, the latest one. My friends would not leave me alone, 'Come on, come on, you are the only one left. Let us find you something, bring her here'. When I would come home, my parents would also tell me 'get married soon'. (A groom, village in Batken oblast)

Bride kidnapping, then, is not only a route to expedited marriage but also a sort of a 'rite of passage' from boyhood to manhood, where the man can show his maturity by being able to bring a girl home. It is an expression of gendered roles and masculinities. A man from Chui oblast told us how everybody in his family assumed that he had a bride and he had to prove it to his father that he was a real man and "quickly kidnapped someone from the street".

Ironically, even in these situations, the groom is not able to act alone. He needs assistance in many regards. As the earlier quote illustrates, the preparation process, then, becomes the responsibility of older sisters and wives of the older brothers (dzhenes). Identification of the proper candidate is also a task which is often not carried out by the men themselves. The process may be well-planned or completely unplanned, as in the case described below, where a man retells the story of his marriage:

I have a sister, she saw her [his bride] and liked her. That is why I married her. Because my sister said that this was a good girl, that is why I got married. I have a neighbour and my sister knew him. Once she saw how

she [his bride] came to visit her brother. This is how I married her by kidnapping her. (A village in Chui oblast)

In this interview, we clearly see how *ala kachuu* can be a collective action where, in contrast to the first interview in this section, even the choice of the bride and planning of her kidnapping is the responsibility of the family. The above interview was one of the more difficult ones to conduct, because of the reticence of this participant, a common feature among many grooms we interviewed. In fact, taciturnity and even underdeveloped social skills among these young (and not so young) men were frequent complaints raised by the men's mothers. These women even used these arguments as explanations to justify *ala kachuu*, in the sense that for a man with a timid personality and no previous experience with women, it seemed to be the only way to get married. In the words of a mother of a groom, "My son was very shy and he would not have been able to marry in any other way. My older son is different; he went and got married the normal way. But this son had to kidnap her." (A village in Issyk-Kul oblast). An insightful interview with an older groom revealed another factor contributing to *ala kachuu*. Apart from personal issues and lack of communication skills, the rural context discourages 'normal' dating:

Here in the village one cannot just 'date' a girl, we don't have cinemas, and we don't have parks. Where will I take a girl I like? If we walk together and people see us, it will be very bad for her. People will start talking about her, they will think of her as rotten. (A village in Batken oblast)

Culturally, public demonstration of affection is not customary behaviour for many young people. Open communication with girls and declaration of intentions is not commonly practised. In such circumstances, *ala kachuu* functions as an expression of affection. Below is an excerpt from an interview where a groom demonstrates how liking a girl can be tightly bound up with the practice of *ala kachuu*:

Interviewer: Did you know her?

Respondent: I saw her once.

Interviewer: On the street?

Respondent: At a wedding.

Interviewer: Did you like her?

Respondent: Uh-huh... and then I kidnapped her. (City of Osh)

In both of the previous examples, *ala kachuu* was used as a non-verbal message of "I like you and

would like to marry you". Certainly, this leaves no space for a girl to say "No".

Although *ala kachuu* is used to minimise the risk of rejection and there is quite a high level of confidence that the kidnapped girl will stay in the house, the worry that she will not, nevertheless, persists: "I was scared they would come and take her home." (A groom, Talas oblast). The account of a younger brother of the groom is interesting in this regard, as he reports ambivalent feelings when the bride for his older brother was brought home. Her screams and fighting made an impression on him and made him promise himself that he would never kidnap a bride. At the same time, he was stressed by the idea that she would leave; "If she left, we would disgrace ourselves in front of people, and I thought to myself, 'I hope she stays.'" (City of Dzalal-Abad)

Grooms can also find the marriage process stressful and traumatising:

My whole body was shaking, I felt so different. I never imagined that it would be so hard to marry. I felt so different; maybe it was a sign of becoming an adult. For about a week after I got married, I was feeling strange. I can't describe it. I was concerned. I can't say that I felt strange because I was happy or because I regretted it. I couldn't understand myself. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. For about a week or for about ten days I was not able to normally talk to my wife. (A groom, city of Batken)

Regret and shame were also evident among the grooms. One of them recalled the events after the bride was brought to his house: "I did not talk to her. I avoided her. I could not talk to her. I was ashamed, shy and did not go to her." (A groom, a village in Chui oblast) In another case study in Talas oblast, the groom hid himself in the backyard while the *dzhenes* were doing their job. He reported that he felt remorse towards himself and hearing her screams he only wished that she would not stay and leave him in peace (a village, Talas oblast). For many other respondents the chaos and hectic atmosphere which often accompanies *ala kachuu* was also undesirable and intolerable.

Another motivation we identified for *ala kachuu* was the economic incentive. It is perceived that getting married in the 'normal' way is not affordable for certain families, because it requires payment of the bride price (*kalym*), purchasing of baskets of food (*sevet*), clothes for gifts (*sarpai*) and the wedding celebration itself. In the case of *ala kachuu*, these

expenditures become optional and can involve more relaxed methods of payments, including delayed payments, or payment by instalments. One man, from a family of four brothers, all of whom had kidnapped their wives, said:

If you go to her parents and talk and get engaged, you must be ready to have a wedding right away and everything should be ready. When you kidnap her, you win more time and can organize a wedding in two to three months. I had a wedding eight months later. (city of Osh)

Stressing the economic factor was an especially frequent response from the parents of the groom, for whom ala kachuu was often perceived as a cheap and efficient way of getting their sons married. "My son had to kidnap a bride because we could not afford to have a wedding," said a mother of a groom. Pressure for young men to bring a bride home escalates in situations when money has been saved to pay for the celebrations or when the house of the groom's parents has been recently renovated, etc. However, it is worth noting that in a small number of interviews, respondents started showing less confidence in the economic feasibility of ala kachuu:

In my days people rarely got engaged, they just kidnapped a bride. We did not realize that we spent twice as much. Now more people understand that without ala kachuu you only pay once. (A mother of the groom, city of Osh)

Nevertheless, the same old lady, after denouncing ala kachuu as economically infeasible, added, "it is our old tradition, it is even shown in old movies. Dzamilya [a character from a famous book by the renown Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov] was also kidnapped to be married." When ala kachuu is seen as a Kyrgyz tradition its power is comparatively strong. Similar to the stress and fears experienced by the groom, the grooms' mothers have persistent worries that something will go wrong, i.e. that the bride will not agree to stay and this will disgrace their family:

"People will gossip about us. This is a shame (uyat) for us, we are very scared [that the bride will leave]" (A mother of a groom city of Osh).

To avoid such a situation, ala kachuu requires the active participation of the specific group of women called dzhenes. This is an aspect which we think is worthy of special attention.

2.4

THE ROLE OF OTHER RELATIVES

DZHENE

Just like the word kelin, which literally means 'bride' or 'daughter-in-law' to someone, the term dzhene means much more than its direct translation as a wife of an older brother (or other male relative such as an uncle). We can even talk about the concept of dzhene as an informal social institution. Their roles in ala kachuu range from identifying a potential victim and convincing the woman to stay in the kidnapper's house, to monitoring the success of the wedding night and displaying the bed sheets with blood stains on them the following morning. It is traditionally understood that it is largely the work of the dzhenes to make sure that the girl stays in the house. In our interviews, grooms spoke about this as something taken-for-granted; "dzhenes quickly calmed her down and made her sit [behind the curtain]." (A groom in Talas oblast)

The most visible part of the performance of any dzhene is, of course, in her interaction with the kidnapped bride. They meet the girl in the house and take her from the hands of the friends of the groom and start "processing" her. They sit near her and talk her into marrying the groom. It is impressive how effective these women have been reported to be. A

witness to four kidnapped brides, an older sister to their husbands, from the city of Osh describes what happened in all four cases:

All dzhenes came in and quickly put a headscarf on her. It was all very fast. Just an hour or two it took. You know how dzhenes act, they will put a headscarf and a

dress on you despite your objections. You don't even notice...

In the meantime, her own dzhenes is brought to the house of the groom to take part in the negotiations. The strength of her negotiating skills will decide if the girl stays or not. In all of our case studies, the dzhenes failed to rescue the brides. Moreover, we found that dzhenes are often eager to play their role and even enjoy doing the work, despite their empathy with the captured women.

The UNFPA & NSC (2016) study sought to find explanations for these women's involvement in ala kachuu. The majority of respondents believed that the participation of female relatives in ala kachuu was a folk tradition (more than 50 %), 31 % believed they must take part in ala kachuu in order to help their male relatives, while every tenth participant justified other women's participation by their need for additional labour in the home and because they themselves had been kidnapped as brides (10 %).

Thinking about the motivations for dzhenes, we came to the conclusion that in such a traditional patriarchal atmosphere, the opportunity to play such a prominent role can be viewed as a short-term increase in status in the family, which otherwise is quite low. Here we present one interview with an older dzhenes:

We are all always there. We all had to be here when they [men of their families] got married. With one of the brides, it took us a really long time. She did not agree to stay, she threw away the headscarf, and it lasted for a very long time. So, I came in and told her, 'if you have any problems in your marriage, just tell me and I will help you. Here I am standing in front of you and I take responsibility for my words'. So, I took all the responsibility for her happiness and she agreed to have the headscarf put on her and calmed down. (an older dzhenes, a village in Osh oblast)

Grasping the opportunity to feel personal importance, and to play a more prominent social role than usual life circumstances allow, can be very attractive for dzhenes. This is the space where a dzhenes, herself a kelin to a different family (or if to the same family, at least to a different husband), can exert at least some level of control and power and reinstate her individuality. For her, this may be the way she validates her own experience of ala kachuu, normalising it by participating in its perpetuity.

A related set of arguments can be applied to the role

of older women, the so-called 'heavy artillery'. Here in particular we see a window of opportunity for a potential program intervention. One of the brides in a Dzhahal-Abad village told us, "my parents did not agree to have me stay [in the house of the groom]... but an older woman came in and talked to my parents for a long time and talked them into having me stay. Then my parents told me 'Барган жеринен кайтырба' [Don't leave the place where you end up]".

Older women such as grandmothers, aunts, neighbours, etc., often act authoritatively and knowingly in situations related to matrimonial arrangements. They provide advice and consultation, and influence decision-making in matters which are seen as 'women's business'. In situations of increased complexity, very old women are being requested to help with guidance, negotiations, etc. Unconditional respect towards older generations, and compliance with their wishes, is a strong social norm. One of the most powerful strategies is to have an older lady lie down across the threshold, so that a departing girl would have to step over her. This is often believed to invoke a cruel curse. Young women are often influenced by such a threat.

As our data suggest, these older women tend to advocate a more traditional view of life. Even when they represent the bride, they are seen as sources of authority regarding the proper behaviour of girls, and preach authoritatively to young people. We looked at and spoke to these women and understand that they are no longer 'just older women' but women who gain higher social status as they age. The burden of their gender appears to ease as their age increases. The moment they reach a particular age, they start acquiring what they have not possessed before, i.e. personal space, participation in the decision-making process and some sense of control. In this way their objectification may appear to decrease. However, this new status is fragile and its maintenance requires these women to continuously affirm their position because such promotion occurred in the context of a patriarchal society and under its terms. In other words, in order to continue enjoying their hard-won but precarious higher status they must indeed promote traditional values and norms. Otherwise, their status will be questioned.

In contrast to dzhenes and older women, the male members of the groom's family, including the father are characterised by an ostensibly low level of involvement. Even the planning of ala kachuu often does not concern them. Many young people

explained that such issues are not discussed with their fathers; “We don’t [or can’t] talk with our fathers about this...” Many fathers of the groom (kainata) were confused during the interviews and not many of them were actually aware that ala kachuu had taken place. This contrasts with child

marriages which are mainly normally arranged by the parents.

The next section of this report focuses more specifically on early-age marriage, describing it in more detail.



From top:
GSPS respondent, a kidnapped bride, in front of her husband's parental house on the outskirts of Osh city.
© UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

GSPS respondent 's father-in-law is cutting the grass for his cattle. He seems happy for his settled son, despite the kidnapping act which is perceived as a local tradition. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov



From top:

GSPS respondent 's oldest son is enjoying the swing time! He might not even know the true story of love between his parents.

© UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

Baking bread for her big family is a tough job, but GSPS respondent is kelin at the household. So, following local traditions, she is to be a caring wife, daughter-in-law, and a mother for several children simultaneously. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

A large, stylized number '9' is the central graphic element. The top portion of the '9' is blue, matching the top half of the page, and the bottom portion is orange, matching the bottom half. The number is composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent shapes that create a sense of depth and movement.

RESEARCH FINDINGS
EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGES

RESEARCH FINDINGS

EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGES

According to the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study, 76% (in Osh oblast) to 94 % (in Talas oblast) of respondents could clearly state the legal norm vis à vis the minimal age for marriage in the Kyrgyz Republic. This knowledge was more likely to be found among respondents with higher economic status and those with more years of education. Concurrently, 40 % of respondents believed in the need to increase the legal age for girls and 57% believed that the legal age for boys should also be raised. Moreover, about 60% of the respondents believed that the government should take measures against the parents of underage brides and grooms (while about 30% opposed such measures).

In our report we move away from looking at child marriage purely as a violation of legal norms and as a crime. Rather, we attempt to understand it as a reified context-based practice. Our data add to, and sometimes contradict, existing literature on child marriage in the Kyrgyz Republic. The qualitative analysis offers many perspectives from a range of

individuals directly and less directly involved in this practice. Our analysis of individual cases of early-age marriage includes stories which are both unique and similar. We begin our analysis by looking at early-age marriages which have been arranged by the parents, before moving on to the so-called 'love stories'.

3.1

EARLY MARRIAGE CAUSES

1. The role of parents:

Previous sources have indicated the role of parents in planning, facilitating and organising marriages involving under-age children. These marriages imply little involvement from the groom and almost no participation by the bride. This is especially the case when both the groom and the bride are very young.

"The decision to marry me off is the decision of my parents. Marrying of my own will is impossible for me... I think so..." said an early-age bride from a village in Batken oblast.

Another one living in Chui oblast echoes her, "Well, kind of... I can't... sort of, go against my parents. I live and wait for their decision".

An older man from a village in Issyk-Kul oblast, who had his daughters married before they turned eighteen and is himself a father-in-law to a fifteen-year-old bride, repeated several times, "I am telling you again, everything depends on the parents".

For 45 % of the women who entered into marriage before they reached the age of eighteen this decision was made by their parents (UNFPA & NSC, 2016).

Contrary to the popular perception of a well-organized and carefully planned process, confidently and knowingly orchestrated by the parents, our data suggest that the manner in which parents actually make these decisions is frequently unplanned and rather spontaneous. A father of the bride recalls, "This happened in a very ... how to say it (clearing throat)... In a very, very funny way..." (A village in Issyk-Kul oblast). Another parent shares her story, "We were just sitting and drinking tea at our friends' house and someone just said, 'Oh, this girl is a very good one, let's get her married to your son!'"

(Mother of the groom, a village in Issyk-Kul oblast) In describing their children's early marriages parents, often apologetically, would explain their motivation as, "it just happened so...", "it turned out so...", "circumstances were such ...", "we did not know it would turn out that way", "we did not expect this to happen...". We find this data indicative of doubts, questions, uneasiness and even guilt with which parents, in fact, have their children married. This initial impression of spontaneity, bordering on irresponsible parenting, was, however, overridden by our further analysis. We found that even the families who explicitly hold negative attitudes about early-age marriage are not protected from this happening to them. The parents of a woman who was married at age sixteen spoke about their attitudes towards early-age marriage:

We were seriously against people who had their daughters married off young. If we heard about someone giving away their young daughters, we would get nervous and angry. He [her husband] did not expect [this to happen to his own daughter]. He called them [the family of the groom] back two days after the official wooing and said, 'What is it? Have you all gone mad there? She is so little!' (Mother of the bride speaking of herself and her deceased husband, a village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

The father-in-law of the woman who features in the quote above explains:

"To be honest, I did not want it. To be honest... I am myself an opponent of these really young people of sixteen or seventeen getting married..." (A village in Issyk-Kul).

Quantitative data from the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study provides supporting evidence for the existence of such disjunctures. More than 60 % of women and men in the study condemned the idea of underage marriage for their own daughters. However, about half of them also agreed that in any specific case it would be an entirely personal decision for the parents. Nearly 80 % of respondents understood that underage brides risked being entirely dependent upon their partners. While 70% to 95 % of respondents were aware that early-age marriages would almost invariably prevent young girls from receiving a professional education, only about 50% believed that no child marriage could be justified. Nearly half of respondents were ready to have their daughters marry young in a situation where the groom was considered a "good man", and 20% were

ready to do the same if the groom was a rich person, agreeing with the saying that "it is never too early to marry a rich man"⁶. In addition, 81 % of respondents were ready to justify child marriage in cases such as premarital pregnancy, love (54 %), *ala kachuu* (23 %) and under the threat of rape or violence (22 %). This gap between the attitudes expressed and respondent's actual behaviour in a specific situation is suggestive of less visible sources of power which are pushing parents to act in a particular manner, even if it contradicts their internal principles. We now attempt to understand and explain these forces using our data.

2. Early marriage as an identity marker

Previous research has noted the role of cultural and ethnic traditions in perpetuating child marriage. Here we would like to expand this claim by using specific cases to argue that early-age marriage may operate as an important identity marker, necessary to signify belongingness to a particular socio-cultural group. Communities perceive this as a rather unproblematic practice, which makes them distinct from other groups. Rationalisation of early-age marriage by ethnic or socio-cultural tradition is taken for granted as self-sufficient and inherently justified. A father-in-law from a community of ethnic Dungans describes his son's marriage to a fifteen-year-old girl as, "[we did it] just like all the other Dungan people". A nineteen-year-old Uyghur man and a husband to a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl says:

It is in our [Uyghur] traditions to marry when young. My uncle married when he was nineteen, other relatives married at eighteen. For girls, sixteen and seventeen is a normal age for marriage. If a girl is twenty [and not married], it is kind of

An ethnic Kyrgyz informant said in an interview, "We, the Kyrgyz, have such a saying, 'if you throw a *tubetei* [national Central Asian headgear, a scull-cap] at a girl and she does not fall, she is ready to be married'" (a small town in Chui oblast).

An interesting piece of data came from Issyk-Kul oblast, where a local man of Kyrgyz ethnicity had dated his girlfriend, proposed to her and asked permission from her parents prior to marrying her. She, in his words, was "not young but already a nineteen year old woman". Interestingly, he referred

⁶ This disposition is more characteristic to urban setting (twenty eight % vs seventeen %) than in rural setting, the highest being in Bishkek and city of Osh (thirty nine and thirty four % respectively).

to his experience as “getting married in the Russian way” (“Я женился как русский”), implying that all he did, including the choice of the ‘old’ woman and his refusal to kidnap her, deviated from what ‘real Kyrgyz’ people do. This respondent, however, compensated for his apparently non-conformist behaviour by instigating his younger brother’s marriage through *ala kachuu*.

The research team was lucky to gain access to a family from a relatively closed community of so-called *kairylmans*. This is the group of ethnic Kyrgyz people who lived outside of the country (in Tajikistan) and returned to their historic motherland a few decades later. The family we studied came back to the Kyrgyz Republic in 1995 and settled down in the rural area of Chui oblast. This family, like many other *kairylmans*, retained a commitment to ensuring that their daughters married at a very young age (typically before the girls turn fifteen or sixteen years old). The father-in-law of a sixteen-year-old girl, preparing to marry off his own fifteen-year-old daughter shares:

There is nothing bad in this... In our community this is inherent. It is normal for girls to get married when they are young. For us, the Kyrgyz who used to live near the border with Tajikistan, this is normal. Maybe this is Tajik influence. If you are a girl in our community, you must be ready to get married when you are fourteen or fifteen. The girls finish school at the eighth grade, stay at home, and take care of their families. By the time they reach fifth grade they must know how to do everything - cook, bake bread and clean the house - because they don't have much time.

The incidence of very early marriage in this community is considerable, and the interview with the daughter-in-law from this family supports this. She, who married at age sixteen, explained that her own sister-in-law also married at sixteen, and her second sister-in-law at fifteen. Her currently fifteen-year-old sister-in-law will be married within a year. Her friend (also from this community) married when she was thirteen and now, at age fifteen, has two children. Most of the girls don’t study beyond the ninth grade.

We find that the early socialisation of girls in these families predisposes them to accept the attitudes, values, standards and opinions of their community, regarding their identity and sense of self in later life. Coming from such family backgrounds, the girls often believe that what happened to them was a ‘good thing’:

In our days girls do bad things, they become bad, the guys too. That is why if a proposal comes from a good family, the family of the girl gives her to them right away. They want her to have a good life. If a girl is sixteen or seventeen, and so that nothing bad happens to her and no bad family takes her, and a good family comes to woo her, they give her to them. (A bride who married at the age of sixteen, a village in Batken oblast)

Raised up with a set of gender-differentiated values wherein marriage is the ultimate goal for girls, these young women perceive the situation in a positive light. They don’t see it as early marriage. In fact, they think of the age of eighteen as too old for a bride and treat unmarried women of this age as having ‘poor’ qualities and being unwanted by any ‘good’ grooms’ families. They prefer to be married sooner and accept their marriage as an inevitable and natural unfolding of events. In the words of one interviewed bride it is very clear, “I know if not him, then another would have kidnapped me. I am telling you. I am sure; I am telling you exactly right. If not one, then another.”

It may sound from these kind of expectations as if these girls have prepared themselves for the start of life as a married woman. However, our data show that a long adaptation process is often involved once they join the families of their husbands. One section of an interview with a bride who married when she was sixteen is especially striking:

Interviewer: What did you acquire for yourself, personally, in your marriage?

Respondent: I (sigh), how to say, I learnt about life and how everything works in life. I was pampered in the home of my grandma, and then I came here... In the beginning [of my marriage] I used to play with dolls. I used to play jump rope in the yard.

Interviewer: With whom did you play?

Respondent: With the children of his [her husband's] older sister (laughter).

Interviewer: Were you allowed to?

Respondent: Yes, they allowed me. They said, “Let her play, let her play” (Village in Batken)

This excerpt is a logical continuation of her earlier account about her pre-marriage life, which she described as, “you know how it is to live with a grandma. I did my homework, played with friends”. It is, however, incompatible with the required expectation of her to engage in sexual activity with her husband. Apparently, she was not ready cognitively, emotionally or physically. Her interview is highly illustrative in this regard:

"No, I could not even imagine it at all. I was scared, to be honest. I was scared, I did not think, I did not know how... and how it should be. I was very scared and then I got used to it..."

Her and his dzenes, as she said, "prepared her for 'this'". For three days they did not want her to sleep with her husband, telling others that "she was too little". When she actually was forced to share a bed with her husband she, "...was so nervous, it was difficult to get used to it. It was not nice in the beginning, but later it was ok".

A tendency to conform to what is perceived as ethnic tradition in matrimonial practices is comparatively strong, and can be understood as being related to much larger social and political changes which are part of the Kyrgyz Republic's transition process, involving nation-building and identity formation. Dissenting behaviour is demanding and bears the risk of social disapproval, pressure and isolation. These costs are high due to the traditional value of, and dependence upon, the opinion of others. "What will people say?" is a common justification for many culturally embedded behaviours. This has the capacity to affect other important aspects of the life of any family who is seen to challenge these norms, including their economic activities, professional work, access to various resources, etc. Fear of losing social connections can be very powerful for families who have an extensive network of relationships such as friendship, professional ties, etc.

3. Beliefs in the medical advantages of early marriage

In some of our interviews, we found that marriage is believed to help with medical conditions such as epilepsy and other symptoms which may seem mysterious to the families. Previous research shows that in many local communities it is believed preferable to treat mental illness with non-traditional medicine, folk beliefs and prayers. Treating epileptic teenage girls by getting them married is one of the tendencies within this paradigm. During our research a few such cases were encountered. Here is an under-age bride telling her story:

I used to study at school. But because I had headaches I used to attend hospital very often and I was missing school. I used to lose my consciousness often. Then doctors told me if I got married, I would get better. So, I said 'OK'. Now I do not lose my consciousness but I still do have headaches. (A village in Batken oblast)

Another under-age girl suffering epilepsy was kidnapped as a bride. She decided to stay in the unwanted marriage on the basis of previous advice that her illness would disappear once she got married and had children (a village in Issyk-Kul oblast).

A case study from a Bishkek suburb, Novostroika, illustrates the complex way in which health-related concerns can contribute to decisions in favour of early marriage. Here is the mother of this under-age wife telling her story:

My daughter used to have muscle spasms so strong that she used to fall down. Then I found out that in such cases Kyrgyz people marry their daughters early and the girls do get better... Our daughter used to fall down, so she used to miss school quite often and we thought it would be better if she got married, and agreed to her marriage. My daughter used to study well, all of her grades were excellent, but then someone from her class or someone from another school made a joke about when she was having a fit, that person recorded it on his phone and showed it to everyone at school. If this hadn't happened, she wouldn't have got married. My daughter told me that students made jokes about her at school and after that she did not want to study at all; she wanted to get married. (Suburb of Bishkek)

This case illustrates a combination of factors such as folk beliefs, prioritisation of health over education, and use of the tradition as an instrument to bring certain anticipated benefits to the bride and her family. To this girl and her family, marriage was perceived as the only conceivable alternative. The permissibility of early-age marriage made it easier for this family to resort to such a strategy. It would seem that a decision to pursue medical treatment would have been a better option. However, while there is no empirical proof or rebuttal of the belief that marriage can help, there may actually be a placebo effect, reducing the number of fits and so reinforcing these assumptions and contributing to the acceptance of early-age marriage. No similar stories were found in relation to male teenagers.

4. Physically 'overripe' girls

When a teenage girl happens to develop physically earlier than average, her family and the surrounding community tend to judge her as prematurely fullygrown (бышып калды). Her biologically young age ceases to be a hampering factor. Early menstruation and/or earlier development of secondary sexual characteristics work as push

factors for parents to seek an earlier marriage for their daughters, while they are “still good to go”. Words like “ripe”, “strong” (“рослая”), “big” (“крупная”) were used to describe such girls. In the face of the fear that a girl will ‘overripen’ and her chances to get married will decrease to zero, her parents give up. A number of families who took child-brides explained their lack of consideration of their young age by referring to the girls’ appearance:

“She looked nineteen at least, I could never say she was sixteen,” said one mother of the groom in the city of Naryn.

A man in Dzhahal-Abad, guilty of kidnapping and marrying a seventeen-year-old girl, defended himself describing her as “well-developed” and as “having everything a woman should have in a body”. In Talas oblast our group of researchers noted how in the course of an interview with the parents of an early-age bride, they expressed their concern about their other daughter, a ten year old fifth-grader. Her advanced physical development was an apparent source of worry to them in terms of foreseen difficulties if they “wait for too long”. (A village in Talas oblast).

The inclusion of this ten-year-old girl in our data was unplanned but provided a powerful sub-case, showing how gender-prescribed roles have ramifications in practices that are bluntly harmful for women. There is high likelihood that this girl will be married soon, and endure all the hardship such a marriage entails. All this happens because of the accepted order of things, in which a woman’s worth is exclusively defined in terms of her ability to get married and hang on in that marriage no matter what.

5. Migration

A similar set of arguments is applicable to young girls whose parents plan to migrate in search of work. As they prepare to be away from home, parents often feel insecure and uncertain about the reliability of controls they have put in place to oversee their daughters’ behaviour while they are away. They, therefore, are prone to avoid potential risks that would endanger their daughters’ further marriageability. Seeing their daughters married before they leave brings reassurance to the parents that nothing will jeopardise the reputation of their families, and that their daughters’ lives have been put into ‘good hands’. Any family which fails to rid their houses of daughters through marriage endures a significant level of stigma. Having a daughter at home who has never married is considered to be a

level of stigma. Having a daughter at home who has never married is considered to be a family burden, worth of pity and marginalisation. Suspicions about the girl’s purity may arise and destroy her future prospects. Fear that turning down a marriage proposal may mean losing an opportunity which may never re-appear, and that in such a way they risk harming the future of their daughters, is a strong motivating factor. Parents frequently fear that their interference may chase away good fortune, not only from their daughters but also from their entire families, including other unmarried daughters. Social disapproval and lack of understanding from the community result in considerable pressure, while fear of regret and feelings of guilt are a realistic concern.

6. ‘Love’ stories

Apart from early-age marriages initiated and arranged by the parents, our pool of data includes a few so-called ‘love stories’, where the couples themselves initiated the marriage, usually as a result of knowing and liking each other. The results of the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study indicate that 23 % of participants believed that girls’ own desires were the main motivating factor for their early-age marriages. A number of case studies were collected and we present selected stories below:

Story 1. A fourteen-year-old girl and a twenty-six-year old man (both of Russian ethnicity) became engaged and see themselves as married. They are waiting for the woman to turn sixteen and receive her passport in order for the marriage to be officiated at the local registry office (ZAGS). (A town in Chui oblast)

*Story 2. This love story comes from a village in Talas oblast. The young woman was fifteen years old and in the ninth grade when she met her husband, at that time a twenty-eight-year-old farmer. They dated for eight months and when he proposed to her she happily agreed to marry him. However, her parents were against this marriage and the couple resorted to *ala kachuu* and later married in a religious *nikah* ceremony. After the wedding the couple moved to a distant settlement in the mountains where they run a large animal farm together. Today they have three children and a successful business. The man taught his young wife how to drive a car and she enjoys independent mobility. Her parents complained about their daughter’s non-compliant behaviour when she escaped from home to marry her boyfriend, but are satisfied with how her life has turned out. The woman kept repeating during the interview, “We love each*

other. We are very happy. I thank God for the life he gave me." According to the observation notes from the field researchers, her eyes were sparkling with love and she later told them that they only agreed to give an interview because they want to tell people about the feelings they have for each other and pride for what they accomplished.

Story 3. A couple in Naryn oblast got married when the groom was eighteen and the bride was sixteen. They started dating when he was studying in a local college and she was in the seventh grade. While she was finishing the ninth grade, the girl's mother began to insist that she leave the village in order to continue her studies in the capital city of Bishkek. But the couple had "real feelings for each other" and they talked their parents into having them married. Today they have two children and the woman studies in medical school while her younger sisters-in-law look after the family.

Despite the stories above, we do not feel confident in justifying early-age marriage on romantic grounds, involving modern 'Romeo and Juliet' plots set in a Kyrgyz context. The more we engaged in careful analysis and looked more closely at these stories, the less romantic they appeared to us. It is not accidental that we have put the word 'love' in quotation marks. The girls we studied were teenagers for whom it was typical to experience age-related transitional processes such as impulsive decision-making, gullibility, vulnerability to pressure, a search for autonomy, and the desire to be adults. In different contexts all these socio-psychological challenges are described as possibly leading to risky behaviours, such as substance abuse, peer pressure, etc. In our specific context, the risky behaviour includes a culture-specific category of underage marriage. In our circumstances, teenage girls are brought up with and exposed to the idea of early-age marriage as a real possibility and an alternative for girls of their age. We argue, therefore, that the alleged 'love' stories, where a girl's consent to marriage is treated seriously is, in fact, taking advantage of the developmental peculiarities, impulsiveness or youthful outlook, of a child who is unable to make informed decisions.

By way of illustration, one of the bride-respondents, fourteen-year-old Valentina, had a fight with her older sister whom she perceived to be too restrictive. In revenge, she called the twenty-four year man she was dating and asked him to take her away to his house. "I got married out of spite," she said. Any conscientious mature adult would not treat such an emotional and impulsive tantrum seriously, but

rather calm the teenager down and send her back home. But not in Valentina's case, however. Her husband actually brought her to his house in a village in Naryn oblast and a nikah ceremony was performed.

Such examples show that when marriage is used as an instrument to revolt against what is perceived as a restrictive home background, and the status of being married appeals to girls' age-related desires to gain independence, such marriage is not a union of equal partners. It is an adolescent strategy to defy curfew and restriction. In this regard, we argue that some love story-based child marriages are, in fact, evidence of parental neglect and exploitation of the teen brides' vulnerabilities.

There is substantial data to conclude that many of these couples are victims of low awareness of safe sex practices and non-existent sex education. The UNFPA & NSC (2016) national survey revealed that 17% of respondents believed that the main reason for child marriage was "premature sexual activity" among teenagers. Our own research confirms that premarital teen pregnancy is a frequent driver of marriage. A medical worker in Chui oblast confirmed our findings by reporting many cases of unintended pregnancy resulting in early-age marriage. She regularly meets the mothers of young women, who bring their pregnant daughters to the gynaecologists:

Mothers learn about what happened late and bring their daughters to register in the clinic. What should she do? The mother forces the boy to marry her daughter. Who is to blame? The boy or the girl, who knows? There are many cases like these. These are problematic cases. Young people date and become sexually active, girls get pregnant...

The above mentioned 'love' Story 3 from rural Naryn also has its own secret. Despite the fact that the family carefully concealed the fact that the bride was three months pregnant at the time of the marriage, this information was shared with the research team. On the basis of such data we reiterate that contemporary youth build their relationships in a society where the topic of sex is largely taboo, systematic sexual education does not exist, families are not used to having open discussions about sex and sexuality is highly controlled. Knowledge of safe sexual practices is very limited. In these circumstances, unwanted teenage pregnancy is not a surprising outcome and effectively facilitates early-age marriage.

7. Subject vulnerability

UNICEF sources claim socio-economic differentiation to be an influence on the likelihood of child marriage, where it more likely to take place in economically disadvantaged families. Our findings partly support this claim through some data which indicate a certain level of social and economic vulnerability that may predispose girls to early marriage. One is the loss of a mother or both parents. For the community it is seen as natural for the surviving children to seek protection and shelter in the homes of their new husbands. It is taken for granted that they cannot live independently without being protected by a family. In such cases, the early age of the girls can be overlooked due to such special circumstances. Relatives of the child find it is their duty to help arrange speedy marriages for their orphaned nieces. An ethnographic note below is an illustration of this phenomenon:

A man in his late thirties calls his friend on the phone with 'good news': his seventeen-year-old daughter got married. From the conversation it became clear that the mother of the girl had died and his main objective was to marry her off and not to worry about his responsibility any more. He is now happy that she will not 'rot' which apparently is assumed to happen to a girl with no motherly control. Now, he believes the girl will have a life of her own and not be that lonely. (An ethnographic note, a conversation overheard in the course of data collection, Bishkek)

In the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study, 86 % of respondents believed that normal development of girls was impossible in the absence of a mother or maternal influence.

We collected many examples to support the claim that social and economic disadvantage is a strong push factor for families considering the option of early-age marriage. For example, a seventeen-year-old mother of two, living in a village in Naryn oblast, grew up in a public boarding school for poor children. When she graduated from the

boarding school she would be left homeless with only nine years of education and little family support. Marrying a much older man seemed like a good opportunity for her to succeed in life. At the same time, a sixteen-year-old girl from Osh oblast, living with her grandmother (because her parents had divorced), dropped out of school and got married to escape the depressing atmosphere at home to what she expected to be a new family life. Another respondent from Chui oblast eagerly married a man whom she perceived as much more financially stable than her own poor household. An adopted child, who was raised in a troubled family setting and was a frequent run away, easily became a victim of not only early-age marriage (at fourteen) and teenage pregnancy, but also of a polygamous marriage (Chui oblast). Poverty was identified as a cause of child marriage by 18 % of the population in the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study. This was especially true in Batken and Issyk-Kul oblasts, and in Bishkek.

Among other variables which we find to have an effect on the probability of early-age marriage is whether it occurs across generations in the same family. We found that in most of the child marriage cases we investigated, the practice circulated in the families. This observation was true even among those ethnic groups which traditionally do not engage in child marriages.

We have already learnt from existing sources that early-age marriage prevents young women from completing their school education. Our study provides findings which support this and also offers an additional argument regarding reverse causality. Not only is it a fact that girls are forced to leave school once they get married, but those with a record of poor school performance, and those who have already dropped out, are more likely to get married before they turn eighteen. Due to the typical 'either marriage or education' type of thinking, marriage is perceived as a natural and feasible alternative for dropouts.

Case Study #2:

An early-age marriage: The link between dropping-out and child marriage, and how victims can move on from both. Bishkek

Seventeen-year-old Lira is the oldest of five daughters in her family. When her mother returned to work the youngest was not yet one year old and Lira took full care of this sibling and

her other little sisters. When Lira was fourteen she dropped out of school, which she explained by her not having enough time for both her studies and looking after her siblings. Soon after she married

an eighteen-year-old neighbour whom she had known for some time. This is how she described their story:

"Then we started seeing each other more frequently, called each other late at night and in the mornings, and came to the decision we should get married. He had asked me before if I would marry him when I grew up. I was little and would answer "yes, I will marry you". After that he told his parents and asked me to tell my parents. When I told my mother she got angry and beat me up and told me not to be insane... They [his parents] came one day and my mother told them just to put earrings on me [an indication of a formal engagement]. In three or four days they brought earrings, put them into my ears and took me home with them."

But this marriage did not last long. Lira explained it in the following way:

"After we married we lived with my mother-in-law. Alan [her husband] started drinking and we got divorced. Well, we had a fight and I went to my mother's place, started living there again and looking after the children. Since then I stay at home. His parents also drink, he did not receive any good upbringing, he drinks and comes to my parents

when drunk. [...] Now we only speak on the telephone. He says we will move in together in the spring. After all, I can't live with my parents having two children. I must move out."

At the time of the interview (February 2016), Lira had a two-year-old son and was five months pregnant. She was living in her parents' house, helping her mother with her four younger siblings and doing work around the house.

Retrospectively, Lira daydreams, "I would now be in the eleventh grade, preparing to study economics at university". She used to be a good student and her teachers encouraged her to come back to her studies, which she planned to do before she became pregnant with the second baby. Now she will wait until her second child is born and old enough for her to receive a hairdresser's certificate.

The couple had a nikah ceremony officiated for them but did not register their marriage in a registry office (ZAGS). This was explained first by her not having a passport (due to her young age), and then by his losing his passport. As a result, their child does not have a birth certificate.

3.2 CONSEQUENCES OF EARLY MARRIAGE

1. An omnipresent risk

Another set of data helps to illustrate a complex cognitive and behavioural pattern guided by the competitive spirit among grooms' families. Young girls, especially in rural areas, are at constant risk of being kidnapped⁷. The families of the potential grooms often fear losing their kelin-to-be to competitors. Apparently, even the prior engagement of a woman to a man is not a strong enough reason to effectively prevent and escape kidnappings by other suitors. Such a high level of uncertainty and the atmosphere of a 'never-ending hunt' for marriageable women force grooms' families to act, i.e., to 'grab' the best kelin before someone else takes her. The girls' families tend to agree to give their young girls away in marriage because they fear the alternative of them being kidnapped by unknown and potentially undesirable candidates. In this case they are forced to choose between two evils and they prefer the one in which they retain at least some sense of control over the situation. One example we present here took place in rural Batken, where a man decided to kidnap a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl because of the fear of losing her to other men. The man explained why he refused to wait until she reached eighteen years of age:

“We were friends_ and then... what do I see? Two more [guys] tied to her. You know in our village we have this... bride kidnapping...”

His wife confirmed his words, “He kidnapped me so that others would not kidnap me”.

The competitive spirit and fear of not being ‘fast enough’ can be so strong that the strategy of kidnapping becomes acceptable even for those individuals and communities for which *ala kachuu* is not considered typical. Indeed, the man described above was of Tajik ethnic background. He justified his act by citing the Turkic background of his bride, in whose community bride kidnapping is believed to be a widespread tradition.

The threat to a girl’s security and the lack of control over the situation makes the old strategy of prolonging the time between engagement and marriage less popular. We discovered that families could use this strategy to strike a balance between the prestige of having daughters married off and any concerns about the young age of the bride. In this way, the child bride would be given time to ‘grow’ before she joined the house of the husband. However, we find that this method has now largely lost its relevance for the reasons described above. A father of an under-age wife explains that, “to avoid shame, we’d better have them engaged as soon as possible and have the wedding as soon as possible and let them live together. This way is safer for us.” (A village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

Sadly, the families were found to be preoccupied with the idea that the ultimate goal for their daughters is to be married. Fear of failure to make this possible is a considerable motivating factor for many families. In our next paragraph we describe how this fear may play out in early-age marriage.

2. Access to education

Grooms’ families are often resistant to having their daughters in law (*kelins*) attend high school or a university, and to investing in their education. In many settings, especially in rural areas, the work any *kelin* is expected to carry out does not require a university or even high school diploma. Attending a school or a university would require a *kelin* to enter public spaces outside of the home on a regular basis, a behaviour which is often considered inappropriate

⁷ In the UNFPA & NSC (2016), eleven % of respondents agreed that child marriages take place in Kyrgyzstan due to bride kidnapping of underage brides

for married women, as studies would interfere with her work around the house. There is also a fear that *kelins* may do better than their husbands and this is unacceptable in any traditional patriarchal family. One respondent explains why she could not continue her studies, “He told me if I did not study, why do you have to study?” (A village in Osh oblast). We found situations where the family in-law supported their *kelins* in receiving their education in only two cases. In one of these the husband built their house, they lived separately from the in-laws and bride’s mother agreed to help with the children.

Lack of education and professional skills prevent these women from gaining desired employment later in life. With the exception of one of the ‘love stories’, the brides experienced regret about their lost opportunities. An early-age bride complains that she is now restricted in her choice of work, “I regret. I regret so much. I should have studied better in school” (A village in Naryn oblast). Economic dependence is a source of frustration:

I studied to become a cook. I did not finish because I got married. I am very sorry about it. I should have finished my studies. I have little children and I wanted to get a job in the kindergarten and they told me that because I don't have any education they couldn't take me. I could have studied and I could be earning now and be supporting my family and my mother. (An early-age bride, a village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

I want to work for myself... to buy myself shoes and clothes...[...] Apashka [her mother-in-law] buys all the clothes for us and also for Rahat [her husband]. Underwear? I tell my husband [that I need some] and we go together to the bazaar and choose together. I want to earn money to help my sister and my mother. I want to study now and be free again... (A child-bride, a village in Naryn oblast)

Humiliation and low quality of life are additional ramifications of their economic dependence. The bride’s expenditures are strictly controlled; the need to ask for permission and for the detailing of all purchased items may extend to include articles of personal hygiene and underwear. Discussing these with a father-in-law can be mortifying for these women and they may choose to go without these necessities, decreasing significantly their basic quality of life. Such practices qualify as economic and financial abuse but are commonplace in the families of early-age brides, because these girls are often seen as incapable of rational spending. We also found an instance of blunt economic and financial exploitation of a young woman, including control of her earnings:

Roza has been kidnapped and forced to marry a random man. She was brought to the house of her husband to live with his mother and a divorced sister and her children. Roza takes full responsibility for all cooking, cleaning and laundry. In addition, her mother-in-law got Rosa employment in the firm of a former friend, and uses her local connections to make sure that Rosa's salary is given directly to her, by-passing her daughter-in-law. In full control of the financial means, the mother-in-law forces her kelin out to work every morning and gives her about fifty som per day, which is barely enough to cover transport expenses and food. As the research team observed, Rosa looks depressed, exhausted, and malnourished. (A village in Batken oblast)

We did, however, find one instance of an opposing view, where an older husband shares his disappointment in his young wife. From an interview with him we learn that it was especially difficult for him when he had to interact with her relatives, cousins, and other younger people for whom he was a kuyo bala (a son-in-law). Despite his older age, he was pushed around by the much younger brothers of his wife because of his social status. He also complained that he had spent too much time, strength and energy on 'raising' his wife. This respondent did not recommend other men to marry women younger than eighteen years of age:

It is better to marry women who are only two to three years younger than you. In this case, they are physically strong, and their morale is more prepared, so that their thinking level is the same as their husband's. My wife was young and could not stand long celebrations. Also, we would drink tea with my parents and she would pour tea sitting at the edge of the table as is usual and fall asleep. This was embarrassing. My parents would tell me to pour the tea. But I don't like it, why did I marry at all if I have to pour the tea myself? (A village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

A high level of paternalism was very evident in the case above. It is not surprising that domestic violence was also identified in this family.

3. Access to health and food

An invisible form of domestic violence was identified among a number of child-marriage families, i.e., neglect. Our data allows us to speak about families who fail to provide adequate access to health services for their child brides and often leave medical problems untreated. While the girls themselves showed a low level of health awareness and habitual self-care, their access to health services, which is

already generally quite low in rural areas, becomes even more so because it is mediated by their mothers-in-law.

A gynaecologist from Chui oblast shares what is for her a frequent scenario:

"A young mother-in-law brought a pregnant teenager daughter-in-law to us. We ask her about what happened and she tells us, "Here, we took her but she is too young and I don't know what to do..." In these circumstances when the mothers-in-law are themselves poorly educated about health issues, the wellbeing of the young brides is certainly at risk. In principle, the brides are taken to the doctors by their kainenens (mothers in law). If the mother-in-law does not consider it important, the brides are cut off from accessing professional antenatal care. Double mediation is also common, when the husband decides whether a health complaint is worth discussion with his mother who in turn decides if the issue is serious enough for it to be worth turning to doctors.

While many mothers-in-law do show significant concern about the health of their daughters-in-law, we also encountered a few cases of apparent neglect affecting the health of kelines. Until stark external signs of a problem appear, like severe bleeding, the family may not consider taking a bride to a doctor. "If everything was fine the first time, why should there be anything wrong this time?" is a common explanation for inaction. Below is a quote illustrating

I was pregnant and working in the garden and did not feel well. They told me it would go away. When the bleeding started I asked them to take me to hospital but they told me to wait and see if it stops by itself. I went outside and our neighbour saw me. He came and started shouting at them and they took me to the hospital. [The informant miscarried.] (An early-age bride, a village in Batken)

This quote is an overt illustration of domestic violence expressed through a failure of adult family members to provide adequate healthcare to a pregnant girl. Other similar cases were encountered in this study. One especially cruel case of violence came from a village in Naryn oblast, where the husband of a sixteen-year-old wife wanted to wait until her screams during labour were "loud enough" to take her to her hospital. Even his own mother was surprised at his lack of concern:

I told Rustam to go and call the ambulance. He said, 'No, when she really screams I will call the ambulance.'

I asked him why do we have to wait for her screams? Who told you that she should be screaming? I insisted and took her to the hospital.

There is an apparent contradiction between the expectations made of the bride and the amount of care provided to her. It is typically expected that the bride will become pregnant immediately after being brought into the house of the groom. After the first baby is born, the pressure does not cease because the second baby will be expected to be conceived within a year or two. In fact, the success of the woman's career as a bride is measured in terms of the number of children she produces. So, the pressure to deliver children is a constant feature of married life. In no cases did we find data indicating either knowledge or consideration of the eighteenmonth gap normally recommended before having a second child. Antenatal care is seriously lacking and not seen as necessary by many families, especially those residing in remote areas. The short intervals between pregnancies increase the risk of complications, preterm birth, low birth weight, etc. In addition, a woman's workload increases massively with every child because her other domestic duties remain unchanged, despite having young babies. Physical exhaustion becomes another health concern.

This pressure to produce offspring is considerable and a failure to do so is a source of psychological turmoil for the young women who did not conceive within the first six months of marriage. Often the youngest participants in our interviews had problems to conceive. In these situations nearly all family members mentioned it as a central problem of the family's life.

A number of respondents had suffered miscarriages and this might be related to the fact that a family's expectations of immediate pregnancy and successful delivery are not coupled with any exemption from domestic chores. The typical responsibilities of daughters-in-law, especially in rural areas, require hard physical work (fetching and carrying large buckets of water, doing laundry manually outside in cold weather, baking bread in mud-stoves, etc.) which undermines their health and harms their ability to maintain a pregnancy.

Among poorer families, signs of anaemia among kelins were observed, as well as food insecurity. Researchers noted the lack of diverse food (with families consuming mostly, bread, jam and tea) and the exhausted physical conditions of the kelins. A particularly striking episode was observed in rural

Naryn, where we conducted a case study focusing on an early-age marriage between a sixteen-year-old woman and a twenty-five year-old man. They lived in a small poorly furnished house with the husband's mother. At that moment, the woman was pregnant with her second child, while her first-born was also very young. Her husband and she were jobless and the only breadwinner in their family was his mother. Below is an excerpt from an interview with the woman, whom we call Zarina:

Zarina: I always feel bad, I am always hungry.

Interviewer: What do you have cravings for, spicy, sweet?

Zarina: No, I am in general hungry. I want to eat right now.

Interviewer: Morning sickness?

Zarina: Well, when I ask him [her husband] to bring me something he will... if he has money. I want to go visit my sister. She will make manty (meat filled dumplings) and I will eat till I am full.

As the interview ended and the researchers were treated with tea, the mother-in-law came back from work. Our respondent asked her if she had brought food and was very upset to know that she had not. Ultimately, she had tea with bread and jam. It was apparent that this family was failing to provide adequate food for this young woman and she was clearly undernourished.

In these circumstances the young women are in an especially difficult position. While they are expected to produce children, they do not receive sufficient support to sustain their own wellbeing and health. Even though we did not find much data on the impaired health of the children, it is widely known that malnutrition of pregnant women and the requirement to perform heavy physical work may impact on the health and development of the infant. It must be noted here that all of this is taking place in the context of an outrageously high national maternal death rate, the highest in the former CIS countries in fact. While only one case of maternal death became part of the data pool in this research, the pain and suffering reported in a large number of cases were considerable.

Furthermore after the first baby is born, the pressure does not cease because the second baby will be expected to be conceived within a year or two. In fact, the success of the woman's career as a bride is measured in terms of the number of children she produces. So, the pressure to deliver children is a constant feature of married life. In no cases did we

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3.3

ROLE OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

1. Medical treatment and health workers

The importance of medical institutions in relation to child marriage cannot be underestimated. Medical workers, mostly gynaecologists, are on the frontline, dealing directly with the physical health and even psychological wellbeing of child-brides.

The obmennaya karta or clinical record of a pregnant client is a useful document which provides access to information about each underage bride who comes to seek health services. It could become a powerful instrument in the systematic identification of individual cases of child marriage, allowing the problem to be addressed at a local level. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with health workers to explore their knowledge about and attitudes towards child marriage in their communities, and to find out more about the services they provide to those involved.

All of the medical workers interviewed reported an increasing rate of teen pregnancies. One of the respondents expressed her amazement:

"There are really lots of these women, 16-year-olds, 17-year-olds. There are many women who get pregnant before turning eighteen. This is a new tendency. These women are many, and many of them decide to keep the babies." (City in Chui oblast)

Nearly all medical workers were ambivalent in their attitudes towards child marriage. When asked directly, they would declare that they are not in favour, citing factors such as psychological and physiological 'non-readiness', 'stolen childhood', 'health issues', etc. In general, they assessed child marriage as an extreme circumstance, something that 'normal people in normal situations do not normally do'. As an

example, one medical worker said, "[Child marriages] are coerced. Any mother, any father, any parents will say 'Hey, wait, it is too early for you'. These young people are not prepared for motherhood or fatherhood because they are children themselves." (A town in Chui oblast). Another respondent stated, "They should not get married early. I think one must first receive an education, gain knowledge and then get married. Otherwise, where will she live, where will she work, how will she live?" (Aiyl Okmotu, Chui oblast).

However, when asked in a less direct manner, we could see drastic deviations from these negative attitudes, which they probably felt were expected of them professionally. Below is a quote from an interview with an experienced medical worker who begins with statements which condemn early marriage but slowly softens them:

Child-bearing age ranges from 18 till 49. Even if, before 18, a woman may be physically ready, psychologically she is not. She may not fully understand the challenges of motherhood. However, some young women bear this responsibility well and live in normal families and become fully successful mothers.

In another instance, when asked if she would allow her relative to be married before turning eighteen, a gynaecologist immediately answered, "it depends on

what kind of family the in-laws are.” There is a clear distinction being drawn between child marriage in ‘normal’ families and those in disadvantaged families in the mind-sets of these professionals. The disjuncture between health workers’ personal values and professional views on child marriage also impacts the quantity and quality of medical support services they provide to those in need.

In many instances, underage mothers represent additional workloads for doctors, midwives and nurses due to the high incidence of prenatal, postnatal and birth complications among underage pregnancies. The medical professionals interviewed reported increased rates of complications in underage pregnancies, related to contracted pelvis, preeclampsia, vaginal bleeding, nausea in the third trimester of pregnancy, and a general level of “physical immaturity”. Premature births are common among teen mothers and intensive care for newborns is a frequent necessity.

One tendency we observed is that, “underage pregnant girls always come late [for prenatal care observation in a hospital]. This is a problem.” Not only does such behaviour decrease chances for early diagnosis of problems and preventative care, but lack of proper documents such as the official pregnancy record (obmennaya karta or ‘obmenka’) drastically inhibits professionals in providing an effective service, as they lack basic information about the patient.

Medical workers describe how it typically happens with young mothers: “We want to study the ‘obmenka’ (pregnancy record). But she has no obmenka. She has never registered; no doctor has observed her, there has been no ultrasound.” (A town in Chui oblast).

The obmenka is an obligatory document and before any doctor or mid-wife actually engages in medical examinations or treatment, she or he is expected to ensure that it has been properly filled out. And so

they have to embark on this time consuming task. A gynaecologist from a Bishkek suburb explains:

We ask them [teenage patients], ‘Did you go to school? Did you finish school?’ There are girls who did not finish school. They only finished seventh grade or fourth grade. Some are illiterate. But they have to write themselves. We tell them to write their last name. They cannot write their names...

Medical personnel in these cases must take on the additional responsibility of being clerks, teachers, translators, mentors, etc. This takes their attention away from their core work, decreases their productivity and clearly frustrates them.

This also leads to a decrease in empathy for childbrides and pregnant minors amongst medical professionals and has an effect on the quality of medical service provision. With the health workers’ judgemental attitude it seems as if they are effectively punishing the girls for what they perceive as misbehaviour. Here is one doctor describing her almost automatic approach to pregnant teenagers who come for a consultation:

Well, we don’t go into details, I simply tell her that if she aborts her pregnancy she can become infertile, and if she keeps the baby, she can have a miscarriage and if bleeding occurs which we can’t stop, we will remove her uterus entirely. (A town in Chuy oblast)

This is clearly not an illustration of an empathetic and supportive consultation but is effective in demonstrating the frequently negative and neglectful attitude of doctors to the fears, worries and wishes of these patients. Such an approach transmits the message “you got yourself into the situation, now deal with it”. Another infamous story is worth discussing here because it also shows how the stereotyping and prejudice among medical personnel can be expressed in unethical behaviour and a mechanical ‘butchers’ approach, leading potentially to a dramatic outcome (Case study 3).

Case Study #3:

Underage pregnancy: Reproductive health failure and medical treatment

Valeria was 14 years old she met Konstantin, who was 25 years old. They started dating and a few months later became engaged, mainly in order to minimize Valeria’s mother’s worry about the considerable age difference. Valeria soon became

pregnant and even though this pregnancy was unplanned, the child was rather wanted. At six month pregnant, Valeria started having vaginal bleeding and Konstantin took her to the hospital.

In the words of Valeria and her mother, upon arrival at the hospital and after an initial examination Valeria was put on a drip to help counteract the bleeding. The nurse who administered it assured them that the baby was alive and that the bleeding was insignificant. However, the plan was then abruptly changed when another doctor arrived; "Doctor T. came in, put her hand inside and peeked inside and ordered everyone to start preparation for surgery. They did a caesarian section and I woke up and the baby was not there," shared Valeria.

While in the hospital Konstantin had to endure a humiliating experience, being patronised by a local doctor who tried to push him away from Valeria. Konstantin was perplexed; "They [the doctors] did not treat this child carefully. You know, I can even tell you about one moment. Once she was in the hospital, the doctor, she told me that I'd better ditch

her as fast as I can. The doctor! She does not know me, and tells me this! What were the reasons? Why did she say that? I already started putting the house in order, started renovation and this happened. I was with her until the last minute!"

It would be premature to accuse doctor T. of professional neglect in this case, due to lack of direct evidence. It was obvious that Valeria had not been registered in a medical institution, had not had a doctor assigned to her and did not have an 'obmennaya karta'. But she was 14 years old at that time and this might have immediately put her into the category of a 'problem' family in the minds of the doctor. The doctor's advice to Konstantin might have been dictated by benevolent motivations and her quick decision to approach Valeria's case mechanically might have also been well-intended. However, the ultimate outcome is rather tragic.

It is worth noting that this case study also represents one of the rare instances where the doctors actually called the prosecutor's office after Valeria was admitted to the hospital. The prosecutor's office initiated court proceedings against Konstantin. Valeria and her mother had to write explanatory notes confirming that they have no allegations against him. Ultimately, Konstantin was released.

1. Lack of inter-agency cooperation

Interviews with medical workers highlighted their institutional isolation when dealing with child marriages and teen pregnancies. They complain of a 'lack of interest' on the part of other public services and institutions. "We don't report to law-enforcing bodies, because we see that it has no effect," said a gynaecologist in a city in Chui oblast.

For this medical worker and for many other health professionals this situation is outrageous:

Nobody takes any interest in this issue [child marriage]. In Soviet times, whenever such women would arrive at a hospital, for example, a sixteen-year-old, we immediately reported to the police because the police did the work of dealing with whoever was involved. Today no one cares... We only turn to law-enforcement when we deal with cases younger than 16, when we have cases of 14 year old or 13 year old pregnant girls. In such cases we call the police, but they don't react. They don't react.

At the same time, however, representatives from the school education sector perceive their work on early marriage prevention as also taking place in isolation and feel that the involvement of medical professionals is insufficient. Below is a school director speaking:

In terms of early marriages, in any case, medical workers must be more active. I ask them, "Please, come and give a speech." They should care about the safety of future generations. I mean healthy generations in Kyrgyzstan. They, too, must have a programme, and according to this programme, they must visit schools, talk to school children, use real-life examples, and so on.

School representatives feel unsupported in their preventive work and have the impression that their contribution and hard work is unrecognised. They perceive themselves as being unfairly imposed upon, having to do additional unpaid work. The school director continues:

For some reason, the school teachers are charged with the task of confronting early marriage; 'deal with it, invite the imam, organise the round table, invite the medical workers, invite the women's committees. This is not our job, this is your job'. And if someone gets married early, it is seen as our mistake. It is not our mistake.

We provide one example of a school's preventive work below:

"After two girls got married early in 2013, we strengthened our preventive work among our parents and children, both girls and boys. We organised a round table and invited medical workers to take part on the topic "Early marriage is harmful to health". We also invited our imam so that he could say if Sharia law allows or disallows early marriage. He was on our side, stating that early marriage is really harmful for health and that everybody must first grow up, bloom and only then give fruits. The conversation was with the boys separately and with the girls separately..."
(School director, a village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

From the quote above we can understand that effective preventive measures require a considerable amount of work, especially in terms of organising and ensuring cross-sectoral representation. We know that this type of work is not directly related to teaching, but requires considerable effort and time to be spent for no additional remuneration. In this context, it is difficult for the teachers and school administration to prioritise their time and energy in such a way as to make regular and sufficient space for work on early marriage prevention.

Any case of child marriage, teen pregnancy or bride kidnapping which involves school children is considered an emergency. When an emergency occurs, a school has to follow a highly bureaucratic institutional protocol. If followed strictly, the school is obliged to inform the next tier of educational administration, such as the District Department of Education or District Administration of Education. In this case, the report must be accompanied by an explanatory note from the Head Teacher and the classroom teacher. The latter must write a profile of the pupil in question, including transcripts of school reports, and a document confirming the fact that the individual is enrolled in that particular school. In addition, a detailed description of what was done by the school administration in order to try to prevent what has already happened must be included. Explanatory notes from the parents of the 'guilty' pupils are also attached to the report. After that a special committee is called under the relevant district administration (in cities) or akimiat or local administration or ayil okmotu, which must include representation of the State Inspectorate for Minors. The committee is comprised of the Deputy Head of the akimiat, the local Inspector for Minors, the district police, the parents, the classroom teacher and the head teacher. The classroom teacher and the head teacher must present arguments explaining how the school allowed this to happen and present grade journals, attendance sheets, etc.

In addition, social pedagogues are obliged to visit the homes of the relevant students, investigate their living conditions and write reports about their visits. They must also present the social passport of the students, with descriptions of their personalities, habits, abilities, etc. School psychologists must also produce their own set of documents which describe what they have done in terms of prevention of early marriage or teen pregnancy, etc. Summaries of their lectures on the relevant topics must be presented to the Inspectorate for Minors. In most cases, parents pay a fine for negligent parenting (about 300 KGS) and the school receives an official reprimand.

Such institutional pressure to undertake all this additional work, together with a notorious lack of cooperation from other institutions, can help explain our findings about schools' strong motivation to simply get rid of any suspect pupils. A social pedagogue in his interview makes it clear that it is nearly impossible to study in schools if your status is 'married'; "How will we give her an education after she gets married? It is not even a question of how we should give her an education; it is about how other people would react to that. Even if she wants to study... There have been no girls who continued their education at school after their marriages. We don't have such cases. We don't consider continuing education after the marriage is a wild thing, but other people might suffer as a result." (A social pedagogue, a village in Talas oblast).

Parents of other children agree with such opinions and actively resist the presence of students who could be seen as setting a 'bad example':

When my younger daughter was in her final grade, there was a pregnant girl in her class; she was sitting the exams with a huge belly. As a parent, I see this as a very negative situation. We think this sets a bad example. Other children may want to do the same. (A mother of a schoolgirl, a village in Issyk-Kul oblast)

These data are evidence of prejudice amongst parents and educational professionals. More data it would be wrong, however, not to include two positive stories we encountered. As in the situation described above, a pregnant child bride was dismissed from high school in Chui oblast "because the director did not want her". However, the girl wanted to finish school and her mother appealed to the court and won the case. Ultimately, this child bride was able to finish her school education despite being married. Another finding came from a village in Batken oblast, where a young man, a recent high

school graduate who married a sixteen-year-old girl who was still in school. Coming himself from a neighbouring village, he made the decision to move in with her family and wait until she finished school.

These two 'success stories' are exceptional cases which show how child brides may have opportunities to pursue their education if they receive sufficient support from their families. It provides contrary evidence to the 'either marriage or school' idea we found in the minds of many interviewees..

Ironically, schools as physical buildings are also seen as places where there is an increased threat to girls' safety of girls. This risk can be considered so high that it forces families to give up on their daughters' education. This threat is real. In speaking to groups of activists, we learnt that special school events designed to signify milestones in the educational development of students, such as celebrations of the end of the academic year, junior balls and senior balls, are in fact treated as 'bride fairs'. Young men and their families may be drawn to attend these events as part of the process of 'shopping for and picking' a potential bride. According to some school teachers and police officers, many bride kidnappings occur during and right after the senior balls. For the girls themselves being kidnapped in such a way can bring some level of prestige, or a mark of recognition. It is worth noting that for school teachers this kind of kidnapping is considered preferable, because by this time the girls are not enrolled in school and the administration can no longer be held responsible. On a related note, we also heard about teachers who in talking to communities ask the families to schedule kidnapping in the summer time, when the pupils are out of school. Attending school requires these women to leave their houses and enter public spaces like streets and roads, where they are at risk of being kidnapped.

2. Religious leaders

The role of religious activists in endorsing and making early-age marriage possible has gained prominence in recent years. Nikah, the Muslim marriage ceremony, has gained precedence over the civil registration of marriage at a registry office (ZAGS). The nikah is considered to be the true marriage, whereas registering at the ZAGS is perceived as an annoying formality, a prerequisite to getting birth certificates for any subsequent children. In fact, ZAGS registration is believed to be an externally enforced convention, introduced by the "Russians".

The data obtained from the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study support these findings and show an almost countrywide prevalence of nikah-only marriages, excluding only Bishkek city along with Naryn and Talas oblasts. In these locations official registration alone, or in combination with nikah is the preferred option. These data note that the nikah only option was more characteristic for younger women (18-30 years old), those with a lower level of formal education and those from poorer households. Indeed, more than two thirds (65% of women and nearly 70% of men) consider religious authorisation of marriage sufficient. In the rural areas, 74% of people understand nikah to be the only necessary matrimonial procedure, as opposed to 55% in urban settings. Quite a high percentage of women (37%) and men (39%) disagreed with the legislative initiative to ban religious marriage if it was not preceded by official marriage registration. These findings indicate that family and marital values are being transformed to prioritise religious marriage over legal officiation of marriage. Women reported feeling the harmful effects of unregistered marriage to a larger extent than men, and held more positive attitudes towards the ban. Additionally, the high percentage of respondents (peaking at 24 % in Chui oblast) who did not provide any answer (either because they did not want to, or did not have an answer) is suggestive of an uneasy contradiction between the religious norms and the legal provisions.

In contrast to registration of a marriage at the ZAGS, the nikah ceremony is much less regulated, making it difficult to screen for early-age marriage. In contrast to the process at the ZAGS, nikah is a much simpler option that does not require a written appeal from any partners or a one month waiting period between the issuance of an appeal and the actual marriage. As such, nikah is a simplified, expedited alternative to registration at the ZAGS, with a capacity to be a powerful facilitator of marriage because of its perceived faith-based legitimacy and authority.

The matrimonial service of nikah is officiated by local clergy, typically by a moldo or imam. They typically work at short notice and at the invitation of the hosting families. The media and civil activists have actively protested against what they see as uncritical administration of nikah involving under-age brides. According to the 2012 UNFPA study, some 90% of Kyrgyz Muslim leaders oppose bride kidnapping. Even so, many give their blessing to marriages resulting from non-consensual bride kidnapping, explaining that by the time they perform the wedding rights, the women have 'consented' to the union by word or deed (UNFPA, 2012).

Our findings provide a nuanced understanding of the cognitive, behavioural and emotional motives behind the validation of early-age marriage by Muslim authorities. The religious officials interviewed were diverse in terms of their level of theological education, experience and age. These different characteristics affected their responses but some common tendencies were also identified. A striking factor among this group of respondents was the perceived low incidence of early-age marriage in their communities. Despite this perception, they also indicated that there were a high number of marriages of sixteen or seventeen-year old brides. Apparently, brides aged sixteen and older are not considered to be 'early age', mainly because they have received their passports by this point. Early marriages are considered to be those where the girls are fifteen years old or younger.

In terms of the process, it became apparent that the religious official invited to perform the nikah is very limited in terms of being able to use his own judgment to identify cases of early-age marriage because the bride is physically hidden from the rest of the participants behind a curtain and surrounded by dzhenes. He must rely on the honesty of the inviting party in this regard, as well as in many others. For example, the ceremony requires that the bride agree to marriage by saying "yes". These practices work to make early-age marriages easier to conduct.

The legal age for marriage, as enacted in the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, is eighteen years for both women and men. All respondents were aware of this. Such information is made available during monthly meetings of moldos at the level of ayyl okmotu or city district. For example, as the head district imam in Dzhahalal-Abad oblast, who can be trusted as a representative of at least this geographic area and beyond, explains, "I gather all district imams, give instructions, directions and discuss the state of politics. This is where we discuss questions about nikah and registration."

However, most of the interviewed religious authorities were not univocal in their answers. On the one hand, they tend to align their answers with this legal norm, on the other hand, they are also strong believers in what religion has to say about the appropriate age for marriage. There are solid religious grounds that go against the legal norm and this aspect was very evident in the words of our informants:

In Sharia, Allah is the creator of man, he knows man.

He created him and knows what man is capable of and what his capacities are. In Sharia, there is a system called "balagata". The age of reaching balagata depends on the historical era. When the prophet was alive, balagata was at nine years old for girls and twelve years old for boys. Now our scholars say that boys reach balagata at the age of eighteen, while for girls this age is fifteen, after they start menstruation. (Head Imam, Dzhahalal-Abad oblast)

This quote illustrates a leitmotiv for most of the interviews where religiously prescribed rules are also corroborated by biological reasoning and explanation (e.g., menstruation). The UNFPA and NSC (2016) study revealed that 16% of the adult population believes that growth in child marriage is caused by the growing influence of Islam (UNFPA & NSC, 2016).

Several of the moldos expressed in their interviews criticism of women who waited until twenty-five or thirty to get married. They claimed that their families were not happy and there was more conflicts in the family. Below a moldo from Chui oblast explains this view in his own words:

"When twenty-five or thirty-year-old girls get married, these families will have many conflicts and scandals. [...] You know it yourself, that in earlier times, our mothers and grandmothers married when they were fourteen, fifteen and sixteen. Now, girls get married after they turn eighteen. When her husband shouts at her slightly, or her mother-in-law scolds her, she gets offended. This should not be..." (Moldo, Chui oblast)

In this context, the legislative norm for legal marriage loses much of its power and relevance. Religious injunctions, personal systems of patriarchal values and, possibly, self-justification, working together represent stronger and more coherent reasons for endorsing early-age marriage for girls. It should not be forgotten that any religious activist is also a member of his community and may have relationships with other villagers outside of his roles as an imam. Even a head imam relates, "My family is poor. We live and work within the community, as long as I remember myself, among the people." These parts of their identity cannot be separated from each other, and in many instances religious actors demonstrate a high degree of empathy with fellow villagers who request nikah for their sons marrying under-age girls.

There is frequently pressure from the villagers, as one of the moldos says, "It often happens that the owner of the house is concerned about the expenses and looks for solutions and is ready to do everything

to force moldo to officiate the nikah". Young and less experienced moldos may be especially vulnerable to pressure coming from authoritative figures. Compliance with the situation becomes even easier for the religious authorities when they are reassured that responsibility for their behaviour will be fully taken by the parents of the bride or groom.

However, it would also be wrong to conceptualise moldos as victims of pressure, who blindly follow the expected course of action. We identified one widespread way they have learnt to deal with contradictory circumstances – the 'raspiska'. A raspiska is a written statement confirming an individual's personal decision. The moldo asks for two types of raspiska, one from the parents of the bride, confirming that they agree to their daughter's marriage, and the second one from the bride herself, confirming her own will to the marriage. Reportedly, since 2010 moldos and imams must see the passports of the couple and request two raspiskas. Many moldos reported that there has been stricter control from the state over the procedure of nikah since 2010. All of the individuals interviewed in this category claimed that they would consider refusing to officiate the nikah if the bride is too young. However, only in one instance had an imam actually refused to marry an underage bride:

If the bride is underage, I ask her mother and father to give me written permission, and the bride, too. And only after that I do nikah. Only if they give me raspiskas, will I do nikah. After receiving a raspika from the bride where she says that she is getting married of her own will, and from her parents that they agree to their daughter's marriage, I will read the prayer. In one case, the bride refused to write such a letter, so I refused to do the nikah and left that house. (Head imam, Dzhalal-Abad oblast)

In this specific case, the status and authority of the imam allowed him to turn down the request to administer nikah and leave the premises (unfortunately, what happened to this specific woman is unknown). In the majority of cases, however, it is a difficult, unwanted, unwelcome and risky decision for a cleric to decline a request for nikah. They must make a choice between violating the legal norm, which is punishable by law, and violating social expectations which may effectively lead to punishment by the community. It is often the case that the costs and risks of doing the latter by far outweigh the former. It appears obvious that a more comprehensive approach in policy programming would need to address ways of reducing the social costs of refusal.

The practices around raspiska obviously raise concerns. They may work to take attention away from, and largely mask, the illegal act of administering nikah with under-age brides. The legal status of the raspiska is dubious, just as the circumstances under which it was obtained may be. But the existence of the practices of using raspiskas, regardless of how widespread it may be throughout the country, demonstrates a number of important aspects. One is the increasingly serious treatment of illegal under-age nikah. Another is the way in which it shows the readiness of these people to change their behaviour and even modify the rigid matrimonial procedure if they are given a way to do so. Lastly, it signifies the opening up of a space where systematic preventive activities can be developed in partnership with the Islamic authorities.

3. Law-enforcement bodies

A total of twenty interviews were conducted with representatives of law-enforcement bodies (including three with women). Most of those interviewed were district policemen and representatives of the State Inspectorate for Minors. Bride kidnapping and early-age marriage are criminal offences and it is logical to assume that law-enforcement authorities would be directly involved in preventing and prosecuting these practices. Our data show that the situation is not as straightforward as might be expected, however, and the contexts in which policemen work are often not conducive for their direct intervention. We find that there are costs to their intervening which are much higher than those resulting from inaction.

Police officers operate under specific work conditions. Institutional demands require police officers to work irregular hours and more than ten-hour shifts. They described the strict hierarchy inherent in their activities, and need to meet the targets of their operational plans (ex: numbers of arrests). Preoccupation with 'plans' often results in uncritical approaches to crimes, as well as personal dissatisfaction among the police with their work. At the same time law enforcement is faced with perceived and real lack of public trust and respect. The police suffer and complain of public ridicule and mockery. They also complain about receiving insufficient economic and financial support from the state.

Amongst law enforcement, one issue which makes taking effective preventive measures against ala kachuu and early-age marriage more difficult is the lack of institutional prioritisation. Apparently, both practices are not among the priorities in the everyday work of policeman. As one of them says:

Here in the police we don't have time for this. It is not just that we don't have people; someone needs to come up with a special programme. I don't think that as a functionary I can do it. I have my own job, even now you are asking me questions and I am not thinking well because it is time for me to go and submit a report.

Other respondents described their busy work dealing with issues such as prevention of the spread of religious extremism (Dzhalal-Abad oblast), labour migration (Osh oblast), land distribution and illegal real estate transactions (Chui oblast), as well as suicide rates among minors (Issyk-Kul oblast), etc.

A second finding focuses on the co-existence of two positions on *ala kachuu* and early-age marriage among this group of respondents. There appears to be a strong official position against both practices. The quotes below illustrate a commonly heard opinion among law-enforcement officers:

"As a police officer I am against it. I will carry out preventive measures and explain to the population that this is a criminal offence and one can be imprisoned." (Dzhalal-Abad oblast)

"If I knew, as an official, that a kidnapping is planned, I would inform the parents and the girl herself, because I am myself a father of two girls." (Bishkek)

"As soon as someone calls me, I will call the district police and a task force immediately sets out. The operatives will detain the criminals and start an investigation." (Osh Oblast)

However, as our interviews proceeded we would notice a shift towards acceptance of both *ala kachuu* and child marriage. Some of the participants confessed that they had taken part in someone else's *ala kachuu* and some had even kidnapped their own spouses. In a heuristic sense, they also used other personal examples that came spontaneously to mind to judge *ala kachuu* as a positive phenomenon. Below are some quotes from various interviews which illustrate this:

"My relatives, my cousins were also kidnapped. They live ok. In principle, they live ok; they all have three or four children. They live normal lives."

"Maybe these people cannot afford a wedding, bride kidnapping is much cheaper."

"If I hear about an early-age marriage, and if there is

no official complaint, and ... If it is planned, it means that the parents are in the know. We do nothing. Wedding? Let there be a wedding. Celebrations are good and this is all we know. What and how is not of interest to us."

"I don't care if he kidnapped her or not. If they live well, I don't care. Also, because I kidnapped my wife too. I knew her well; she worked on the night shift as a nurse. Two times someone tried to kidnap her with a car. So, I had to kidnap her... I think in some emergency cases, kidnapping is ok."

This is not to say that law enforcers did not demonstrate their professional knowledge in addressing complaints. From interviews with them we learnt that there is a process in place according to which cases of complaints regarding *ala kachuu* and child marriage must follow a formal appeals procedure:

A police officer must accept a statement of complaint. If she [the girl] cannot write it, it still has to be done. A protocol is written. This is a ten to fifteen minute procedure. Then the offender is identified. Then the kidnappers are brought to the police station, they must fill out the documents. If their guilt is proven, a criminal case is started and the process of suing them begins. If, within three days, the complainant takes her statement back and writes an exemption statement, the criminal case will not be started. If not, the criminal case begins, a task force arrives to the place where it all happened and detains the kidnappers.

An important finding, however, points to the reluctance of law enforcement officers to follow the formal procedures on these issues. The officers' typically slow reactions and unwillingness are partly explained by their experience of complaints filed against kidnappers being frequently withdrawn. Policemen understand the reasons for withdrawal very well. As the police representatives in our study share, the victims realize that the process is not without consequences, "They say it is a shame, a shame. We have, as it turns out, the concept of shame. They are shy and fear that the girl will not marry at all in the future. We really can understand them." (A district police officer).

This becomes especially infuriating for the police officers when they see complainants who are influenced by corrupt motives. Once the victim files a complaint, the other party offers to compensate the perceived harm with money and the former tends to agree:

Two parties had a fight, one party filed a complaint. The other party gave him some money and the first party wrote a cross-application that he has no claims. Here we can't do anything. Laws are laws. The [Criminal] Code prescribes that in such a case of conciliation, criminal proceedings are to be terminated.

For some especially emphatic officers (mostly women), it is important to weigh up different consequences. They ask questions about what would happen to the victim if the kidnapper were imprisoned. They often find reasonable explanations for admitting the withdrawal of complaints in the desire not to worsen the situation for the victim. Here, we have an example of such a tendency:

It was a senior ball in one of the village schools. The girl was kidnapped right from the ball by some unknown boys. Her mother came and wrote a complaint. But in three days she returned and took the complaint back...due to the fact that the girl was going to marry the kidnapper. Of course, the girl stayed. We didn't know what happened in those three days. What if sexual intercourse took place? What if the girl was not a virgin any more, what if she got pregnant right away? If we put him into prison, then, who will want her? This is a double-edged sword.

This and the previous findings explain why and how the formal manner of dealing with *ala kachuu* and child marriage is not straightforward for law enforcement officials. We also discovered additional data which sheds more light on why it may be so challenging for a police officer to take action when *ala kachuu* or child marriage is underway. We begin with the following quote taken from an interview with a police officer with more than ten years experience and of considerable rank:

It is somewhat uncomfortable for a person uniform to do this kind of preventative work. I... For me, honestly, I can't imagine, wearing uniform and knowing the law... and if then if my relative kidnaps... I can't cross that invisible line. How can you be against your relatives, against your own closest people? I am not entirely... I mean, one day I will be done with the police. I will not be a policeman forever. After I retire I don't want to be left alone. I must be careful. Sometimes kinship is much more important than your professional duties.

We see in this quote that there is a serious dilemma and an issue of identity, where an individual must choose between what the uniformed person must do and what the member of a local community feels they should do. We can see that there are serious

social consequences in doing the former when it is in contradiction to the latter:

Of course, it is uncomfortable! The feelings are bad! It is really bad if someone kidnaps forcefully another person. There is nothing positive in this. You wife is shocked, and her 'spirit' has been broken, she will not have her own voice, and she will be hating you all your life. But if a relative is a bride kidnapper, although I will tell him that his actions are illegal and he can be imprisoned, I will not be able to imprison him, because he is a relative. Of course, you can't go against a relative. If a neighbour does it, so, the story is the same [because «жакын кошунан, алыс тууганынан жакын болот», i.e., a close neighbour is closer than a relative living far away].

In the above quote, we can see how the informant refers to the kidnapper and formulates his sentences in relation to him. This points to the fact that the policeman will almost invariably be posted in (and often from) the same community as the husband and his family. The bride may or may not be from that community; frequently, she will have been kidnapped from another village. So, the community to which the policeman has loyalty and in which he seeks acceptance and status is the husband's community, not the bride's. This is where the patrilocal element of Kyrgyz tradition has a particularly damning effect.

Professional duty and status as a community member are in conflict, and there are apparently more risks attached to acting professionally and giving precedence to the law than to not doing so. In other words, non-interference is less costly for a policeman. Social isolation, family disapproval, enmity with community members, rejection by neighbours, and other types of public pressure are high prices to pay in a society where collective norms are highly valued and kinship relations are often linked to all other aspects of life. In addition to these costs, there is a high likelihood of complaints being withdrawn, or the concerned parties behaving in a corrupt way, while personal beliefs may include the idea that *ala kachuu* can often have a 'happy ending', etc.

Police officers may find their own strategies to manoeuvre between these two alternatives. 'On the spot' conflict resolution is one of them. An informant explains; "Well, you go in there, get to know the problem, do preventative work, and then people tell me that it is ok. We, the Asians, prefer not to wash dirty linen in public." Preventive work, in this case, means information provision of any kind, and is another frequent way of addressing the problem.

It comes as no surprise that the number of reported criminal cases of ala kachuu and early-child marriage encountered by the police interviewed was close to zero. It was striking to hear a well-rehearsed and detailed account of what the protocol requires the police to do in a case of ala kachuu, followed by a phrase like, "in my work [of twenty years] I have not encountered bride kidnapping. In my experience it has not happened".

Or, in the case of child marriage, another informant said, "There is a very low percentage [in his entire precinct] of early marriage. Of course, there are parents who agreed to this and had no claims against each other." In all but one area from which our interviewees came no cases of ala kachuu were taken to court. In the only interview with a high-ranking police officer, three complaints were collected in 2015, two of which were later withdrawn and only one of which was actually taken to court.

4. Courts of Aksakals

Courts of aksakals (elders) are local institutions with authority and status, which are generally perceived as "good" entities", which serve the interests of the population, using their members' wisdom and experience. Though they are limited in their conflict resolution role, they are also seen as moral bellwethers in their communities. Interviews and focus groups with the Courts of aksakals, showed a striking level of consistency in their answers which were nearly identical regardless of the region. Aksakals' responses echoed the legal norms, with the inclusion of occasional validity checks with the interviewers (i.e., 'right?', 'isn't it?'). These informants were apparently 'faking good', providing answers that were 'correct', in term of what the researchers wanted to hear and was legally expected of them. Consequently, we should treat their answers carefully, and their cautious behaviour is a source of information in itself.

Unlike other respondents who reported high incidences of ala kachuu, the aksakals either had a very low awareness or denied the existence of these practices. One of them says, "Within the last three years we had not a single case of ala kachuu" (Talas oblast). Another speaking about early-marriages reported:

No, not in our area. Once in the past there was such a case. She was sixteen years old. Not even finished school. Did not study after grade nine. This was six or seven years ago. She was kidnapped. Besides this case we haven't had any. (Dzhalal-Abad oblast)

In relation to ala kachuu, all the aksakals spoken with claimed that in reality the kidnapping was fully consensual. A typical answer was, "No, we don't have that. To kidnap without having known each other, forcefully, with screams and cries and then litigation? No, those we don't have" (Osh oblast). "Random kidnapping ceased," said one aksakal when asked directly what should be done in order to prevent ala kachuu. With irritation in his voice he repeated: "Like I said. Long time ago, six or seven years ago there was one case. We did not have any other cases like this. Secondly, we try not to allow this to happen" (Dzhalal-Abad oblast). The aksakal did not elaborate however on what exactly they did in order "not to allow this to happen".

At first sight, all of these interviews seemed useless, because they featured only grandiloquent monologues. However, inherently they also demonstrated the weakness of the Aksakal Courts to address an issue which at first glance should be within their domain as it involves relations between community members, norms and values. One aksakal, after a long conversation, expressed his frustration:

Courts of aksakals, women's committees, youth committees... [should] work like centres of prevention. This is what I wish to happen. That their work is not just a formality, a way of showing-off, an organisation created just to show-off. I wish that these organisations really worked in accordance with their names. (City of Osh)

Indeed, the answers about what the courts of aksakals actually do were in general rather fragmented and vague: the aksakals simply "look after community" or "ensure order", etc. Some felt empowered by the government to work on preventing the increased and uncontrolled rise of religious extremism and spread of ISIS propaganda among the population, as well as the high cost of traditional celebrations (funerals, weddings, etc.), which they called "cheap pride" indebting families. But their most common work was to consider various appeals from the local community. No appeals relating to ala kachuu were reported to the courts of aksakals. At least nobody claimed to remember any or to have kept records of any. At the same time, the head of a court of aksakals explained:

We don't have any conditions to provide legal support to the community, especially for women. We don't have basic equipment, no computers, no printers to print court appeals and protocols. I have to write protocols at nights and by hand. If someone comes and wants to see some protocols I am ashamed. (Osh oblast)

From this statement it is evident that heads of aksakal courts take records of the most serious cases that reach them. As the courts could demonstrate no records of Ala kachuu and bride kidnapping appeals this suggests that they are not reaching the aksakals, or when they do, they are not considered to be material worth keeping records of. This may be because both practices fall outside of the mandate of the courts of aksakal;

Bride kidnapping is in the criminal code, but it doesn't fall under our union committee. The cases of bride kidnapping should be reviewed by the prosecutor's office, under its competence. If a couple married through bride kidnapping and want to save their marriage, and come to us in order to do so, then we would help them. However, no one has referred such a question to us yet. (Naryn Oblast)

Indeed, the law of the Kyrgyz Republic regarding courts of aksakals stipulates clearly what kind of cases they are and are not authorised to hear. Bride kidnapping and child marriage are both outside of their mandate because they are criminal cases. Ala kachuu is, thus, seen as an area of responsibility for the state prosecutor's office. Early marriage is seen as a subject to be addressed by the schools and boarding schools.

If we can save someone's family, we mostly consider it as our success. Therefore, we implement many activities that are dedicated to saving families and making them stay together. This is something that we mostly consider as success because we can make decisions in the processes of saving and/or uniting families. (Osh oblast)

To "save the family" collectively and with no exception, aksakals reported that they would encourage the bride and her family to stay in the husband's house. They justify this by resorting to traditional norms and values as demonstrated by the excerpts below, taken from our interviews:

"The kidnapped girl is considered well-mannered if she does not resist too much when a head scarf is being put on her head. The community will be thankful to her in this case. What the community thinks is very important."

"A kidnapped girl must stay!"

"There is a saying that we have, according to which a girl is just like a stone that is dropped in some place, and she should stay in the place where she was dropped."

These traditional views coexist alongside more normative and 'liberal' impulses to act in the interests of the girl. We have heard answers such as:

"To be honest, this contradicts the traditions of the Kyrgyz. This tradition of bride kidnapping does not lead to anything good. If there is such a possibility, bride kidnappings should be stopped."

"I think that in our society we must gradually discontinue this ritual of bride kidnapping, we must remove it from the practice of Kyrgyz family building."

"In this situation [bride kidnapping] I would take the side of the woman. I would support the woman. I would do it. I would reprimand the person opposing this to the best of my ability and if he does not listen to me, I would make him take responsibility in accordance with the law and resolve this in this way."

Understandably, these answers are different in quality. Linguistically, they contain conditional clauses, they are clear hypothetical and don't appear to reflect reality. This may be related to these individuals' lack of authority to intervene in such cases. It is also possible that respondents were influenced by the situation and gave answers they believe to be more socially acceptable to the interviewers.

5. State authorities

In the sections above, the dilemmas and lack of sense of responsibility facing police and aksakals when faced with ala kachuu and child marriage were described. Interviews with the representatives of state authorities offer similar findings, although with some specific differences.

Local officials such as heads of local administrations (aiyl okmotu), heads of village administrations (aiyl bashchy) and representatives of city administrations, etc. claim to have little to no experience of responding to formal complaints regarding ala kachuu or child marriage. They typically say, "In my experience these kinds of cases did not take place", "At least, no one has ever turned to me and I have never heard about this..." or "I somehow can't recall anything like that and me resolving such a problem". They tend to explain that ala kachuu or child marriage is not occurring in their community.

At the same time, representatives of the 'distant villages' also deny the existence of such practices. "We don't have forced ala kachuu in our villages" or "We have not had such cases" were typical

responses. Even if they have heard of ala kachuu they were confident that those cases were consensual. There is also a sort of naïve belief in the romantic under-current of each ala kachuu they hear about. Here is how they prefer to see it:

Remember? Here we have two people in love, one is poor, the other one is rich and the parents do not agree to their marriage. So, they do ala kachuu. In current times it is the same... This is how they create families. (A state official)

Or, they believe in the true consent of the women being kidnapped: “Strangely, these women give their agreement themselves. And their parents, too.” Such belief is consistent with yet another assumption these respondents hold, which is that “all girls look forward to getting married”.

One of the informants responded in the following way; “Even if there has been such a case, it does not interest me.” This response suggests that the local government official doesn’t feel any institutional responsibility. This coupled with authorities’ lack of relevant capacity and other factors work powerfully together to create conditions in which ala kachuu and child marriage become irrelevant and invisible to this group of community actors.

There is an institutional framework which delimits the areas of responsibility of village administrations and territorial administrations (aiyl okmotu) by provisions stipulated in the Law on Local Self-Governance in the Kyrgyz Republic. Twenty-five areas of activities (‘punkts’) are listed there as mandatory for implementation in each local government district. In all of our interviews with representatives of rural administration we heard reference to these twenty-five punkts. The closest area to ala kachuu and bride kidnapping we could find was under the general category of ‘social issues’. However, even here, the interpretation of social issues is very specific, as a head of a local

Social services and major social issues are our job. This includes provision of clean water, provision of irrigation water, reconstruction of roads, maintenance of street lights and all of the kindergartens, renovation of schools... All of these are our direct responsibilities and we provide social services.

Therefore there is no institutional space for issues like ala kachuu to be considered in this system. When a head of a local administration (aiyl okmotu) tells us that he has no interest in inquiring about ala kachuu/child marriage, we understand his answer as

framed by the institutional requirements of his job. As institutional actors, the professional attention of the state authority is circumscribed by competing priorities. Any diligent administrator guided by this framework will inevitably be more worried about the categories of work indicated there, such as issues of clean water, irrigation water, religious extremism, etc., which they know they will have to report on to the higher echelons of local government. In urban areas the situation is not much different. Work priorities are too far from the issues central to this report.

However, state authorities did express an understanding of the harm brought by ala kachuu and child marriages and condemned it. For example, a head of aiyl okmotu said, “My attitude to early-age marriages is highly negative. Only marriages with nineteen and twenty-year-olds I consider normal”. Flowing from these negative views is the recognition of the need to act. “The problem does exist and we should take relevant action”, said the head of one local administration (aiyl okmotu). All of the respondents agreed with this opinion. But opportunities for them to act are significantly limited. First, this would add more work to their already busy schedules. One of the respondents said, “We all hope and want to do this work but none of us have time. All of those [direct responsibilities] issues, those everyday problems eat up all our time...” Observation notes also testify to the hectic style of work among state authorities, where they have no time even “to go out for a short smoke”. Another head of local administration (aiyl okmotu) describes his day:

Yes, yes, all these people from all thirteen villages come to see me from morning till evening. I have this stream of people with different complaints. Sometimes I must go to places and resolve the problems on the spot. I also have to work with documents, with correspondence. I must develop my capacity in this direction. After 6 or 7pm in the evening, I work for two or three hours with documents. This is a stream of documents, you see, they are from yesterday. If I have to read them all it will take half a day. In this case, how will I find time to listen to people? I must respond to them as well. Of course, I have assistants, my deputies, and they help and direct me, but I have to do most of the work myself.

An additional hurdle for policy makers seeking to engage state authorities in preventive work is the lack of capacity and knowledge among these stakeholders. As one explained:

You see, not even physically, I can't... I am not a psychologist; I am not even a pedagogue. I am a mechanical engineer and here are all these social problems I must solve in accordance with our requirements ... Such policy or programmes we must do together.

Sensitive topics and contested behaviours such as *ala kachuu* and child marriage are uncomfortable to deal with for many of the individuals interviewed. Training in psychology and pedagogy are seen as necessary to address these culturally embedded systems. Rather than engaging directly, some state authorities therefore speak hypothetically about what they would do in the case of an official complaint arriving on their desk:

First, I would meet with them and explain in legal terms how and what kind of responsibilities and punishment they may suffer if they do it [bride kidnapping]. I would advise them not to marry before they reach marriageable age. I would involve the community, the Women's Committee, and personally try to dissuade them. I would be good at it, I think.

I would come to him and say, 'Are there not enough girls around? What kind of life is it going to be if she does not want to marry you and then how will you live with that?' As the head of the local administration (aiyl okmotu), I would act in accordance with the law.

The second strategy they use is shifting responsibility to others. In the above quotes we hear about the concepts of legal measures and law. This is not accidental. In a situation of institutional discomfort, representatives of the state tend to avoid having to deal with these kind of issues by placing responsibility on the police and law-enforcement bodies:

Yes, there are so many problems... these family relations... these conflicts... our people have this kind of mindset that means they don't turn to police. They think that if you go to the police that means something bad has happened. When they come to me with all of these issues, I refer them elsewhere.

The previous quotes also illustrate that state officials often do not really know how to address such kinds of complaint. When they say they will "act in accordance with the law", these informants are not really sure what this means. It is much more convenient for them to pass the task on. The previous informant continues, "If a signal comes

from our village I would get in touch with the police inspector and their reaction would be instantaneous." Please note the "their reaction" used in this phrase, as opposed to "our". This is yet another indication of the local administration (aiyl okmotu) distancing itself from the problem. Their job description does not require them to get involved and their reporting requirements do not include a relevant category. All of this makes any work related to *ala kachuu* and child marriage potentially irrelevant and easy to ignore.

Finally we found that local officials accommodated themselves to *ala kachuu* and child marriage as "not that bad." Justification and acceptance of these practices were frequently evident in our interviews and this is one explanation of their strange coexistence with apparently strongly opposing views. Attributing the practice of *ala kachuu* to ethno-cultural traditions is one way of making it seem more acceptable, sometimes in contrast to other traditions:

"In the predominantly Uzbek villages marriages are arranged by parents and the couple do not see each other until their wedding. They see each other for the first night during their wedding night. You see, this is a mindset..."


*"In the Kyrgyz villages *ala kachuu* is *ala kachuu*. I, for example, also kidnapped my wife. We knew each other."*

Practical concerns are also applied to child marriage:

"Most of the women in the village get married by eighteen. The main reason is..., they finish school here. Some people do not have money to study further. Those who can afford to, they go and continue studies. If not, what else will a girl do? There is no job, no prospects. The only option is to get married."

"Now we don't have jobs and she will be a burden to her parents. Well, we don't say that, but still, she is of a good age, finished school, does not have a job, stays at home and doesn't go anywhere. What else is there for her to do?"

All of these observations illustrate the institutional inconvenience *ala kachuu* and child marriage represent when formal complaints are made to the state authorities.

A large, stylized number '4' is the central graphic. The top half of the '4' is light blue and sits on a blue background. The bottom half is orange and sits on an orange background. The number is composed of thick, solid-colored geometric shapes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Bride kidnapping and child marriage have been normalised in Kyrgyz society for a long time. These degrading practices have become routine and accepted as “the way things are done”. A number of factors contribute to making their perpetuation possible. They are carried out collectively, with a clear and strict division of tasks and labour. Roles are assigned to family members depending on their age, gender, experience and social status. Each step is rationalised and intellectualised by narratives such as ethno-cultural traditions, financial issues, health, concerns for women’s safety, etc. Participants derive support from interactions with each other. They become interdependent. Their complicity is often obscured by the routineness of their “work”. As part of a well-established larger system, their contributions are expected and taken-for-granted. There is rarely real opportunity for defiance because most of the work is done without thinking, i.e., without reflecting on the criminal and violent nature of their actions, and without adequate naming of their activity. It can also be costly for individuals and those around them in terms of economic, social and political resources and the ability to access them.

Community representatives, state authorities, schools and religious leaders are all part of this same system of ‘doing things’. Their complicity is even more obscured by the fact that they are farther removed from the process, but work to silently condone it. Institutional frameworks often support nonaction because they don’t create a space for legitimate, systematic and organised responses against *ala kachuu* and child marriage. In these circumstances, to take action would have problematic consequences for the personal and professional lives of officials. To date, these cases are perceived as ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘undesirable’.

Our findings suggest that incidents of child marriage and *ala kachuu* also negatively effect on peace and peace building. Inter-ethnic conflict in the summer of 2010 in the Kyrgyz Republic raised considerable concerns about safety among families living throughout the country. Fear and insecurity forced many families to encourage their daughters to marry at a young age, and sometimes a very young age. Our data show that six years after the inter-ethnic clashes feelings of insecurity continue to influence communities to support child marriage.

Taking a longer-term perspective, we clearly see how widespread gender-based violence, of which *ala kachuu* and child marriage are specific instances, can seriously threaten peace and development on a national level. As a point of departure we take CIDA’s (2002) conceptualisation of peace building as the long-term “effort to strengthen the prospects for internal peace and decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. The overarching goal of peace building is to enhance the indigenous capacity of a society to manage conflict without violence. Ultimately, peace-building aims at building human security, a concept

which includes democratic governance, human rights, rule of law, sustainable development, equitable access to resources, and environmental security” (<http://www.icrw.org>).

We agree with the understanding that securing peace is inherently connected ensuring equality between women and men in all spheres of life. *Ala kachuu* and child marriage have profound negative impacts on young women, young men and their families. Women who experience violence and neglect are hindered in their ability to develop as individuals and as members of society. Opportunities for independence and freedom are violently taken away from them, reducing their potential to contribute to conflict resolution and peaceful management of disagreements. Women who suffer gender-based violence are generally disempowered to such a degree that they have difficulties asserting their individual rights, making independent decisions and dealing with institutions outside of the family context. Those who ignore *ala kachuu* and child marriage are condoning violence against women and girls, while the considerable potential of the female victims to contribute to peace-building efforts is likely lost forever.

On a more theoretical level, there is a human rightsbased approach to violence against women. *Ala kachuu* and child marriage are instances of gender-based violence which are recognised as notorious violations of human rights and the rights of the child. No country can speak of successful development, peace and security if more than 30 % of its women endure deprivation of power and access to exercise their agency and influence their own lives. Our findings demonstrate that too many women who became victims of *ala kachuu* and child

marriage or both are kept captive, exploited and subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse and neglect. They are deprived of education and future prospects. We can't speak of peace when so

many women are forced to battle alone against such a demeaning social acceptance of violence. In such a situation, peace-building objectives cannot be attained because gender equality and justice are inherent requisites for their fulfilment.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations

1. Effective cross-sectoral cooperation in preventive work to combat child marriage and *ala kachuu* must be developed and maintained. A joint strategy based on a shared understanding and sense of ownership must be developed by partners such as schools, health workers, the religious community, police, state administration, local administrations (*ayil okmot*), etc. The strategy must include clear goals, activities, dates and responsible partners. If such a strategy already exists, an analysis needs to be made in order to understand its lack of effectiveness and identify gaps that have to be addressed. Possibly, operational procedures must be developed to guide actors in a step-by-step manner as to what actions must be routinely undertaken in cases where a child marriage or *ala kachuu* has been identified.

2. An interesting practice, unofficially called “social patronage”, has been identified in the city of Karakol, in Issyk-Kul oblast. Twelve full-time social workers under the local Centre for Reproductive Health work together to identify cases of early marriage, teen pregnancy, families at risk and violence against women and children. Each social worker collects and registers data for further monitoring of the health and wellbeing of individuals and families in need. Among the latest work of the “social patronage” team was identification of a sixteen-year-old mother of an infant with heart conditions. Social workers observed her case and could identify her as being subjected to rape. They report such cases to relevant organisations including the Centre for Reproductive Health which helps these women with medical examinations, provides consultations and distributes contraceptives. It is recommended that such a successful practice is studied in depth, given support, and considered for possible replication to other areas.

3. Child marriages and *ala kachuu* cannot be homogenised into monolithic categories but must be

seen as context-dependent. In this regard, certain communities, including particular ethnic groups and settlements with high incidences of these practices, may require specific policy actions, programmes and additional efforts aimed at better in-depth understanding of the unique characteristics of the situation. Specific areas of action need to be addressed in relation to a range of vulnerable groups of young women. These groups include graduates from orphanages and boarding schools.

4. Previous and current policy measures intended to prevent *ala kachuu* focus on the practice as a legal issue, with guilt being attributed to one central figure, i.e. the groom. Our findings make it very clear that in most cases other people are equally involved in the process. Specific programmes and activities need to target older women (mothers of the grooms and brides), as well as *dzhenes*, whose role was discovered to be central. Members of older generations have great potential for mobilisation to help combat *ala kachuu* and child marriage and this opportunity must be used.

5. Lack of a culture of communication between daughters and parents, especially mothers, can mislead victims of *ala kachuu*. Communicating clearly and coherently with young women as to what to do in case of *ala kachuu* should take place before kidnapping happens, starting from as young an age as 13 or 14 and be regularly repeated throughout high school. Local NGOs, government officials, and international organizations can help foster a more communicative culture by creating discussion prompts for mother-daughter conversations, checklists of actions for mothers and daughters to take in the event of bride kidnapping, and basic information or case studies on the consequences of remaining in kidnap-initiated marriages. We recommend that such materials be

distributed to girls and their parents via Women's Committees, Youth Committees, and schools throughout all areas of Kyrgyzstan, as well as by colleges and universities.

6. Faked or staged *ala kachuu*, sometimes termed 'based on agreement' *ala kachuu*, must be discouraged from happening as this leads to normalisation and naturalisation of the process. It makes it easy for the community to treat any case as consensual.

7. Empowering girls must involve an educational component. Introduction of the topics of *ala kachuu* and child marriage as violation of women's human rights and the rights of the child into the curriculum of middle and high schools (within Manas studies, for example) may be an option.

8. Some of the greatest harm from bride kidnapping and child marriage comes from their often near-immediate consummation, for which many female victims are both psychologically and physically unprepared. And yet this publicised, ritualised sexual intercourse serves important cultural functions for the interested parties: ensuring and publicising the bride's virginity, 'securing' her for the groom, and raising the status of the *dzene* within the household. As such, this practice is unlikely to change unless culturally sensitive alternatives are found. Local NGOs should work with the communities where such marriages are common to identify alternative, non-sexual rituals through which these cultural needs could be met. Though full elimination of both bride kidnapping and child marriage is preferable, creating these alternative rituals could at least make the marriage experience less traumatic for victims and be a first step toward transforming non-consensual marriage practices into fully consensual ones.

9. One significant barrier to initiating court cases against bride kidnapping and early marriage is lawyers' lack of knowledge and direct litigation experience, particularly in rural areas. That said, cases against these practices have been successfully litigated. An easily accessible database of lawyers who have brought cases against non-consensual marriages should be created. Local NGOs, the Prosecutor General's Office, and international organisations can further facilitate penetration of the legal process by (i) organising trainings by these experienced lawyers for their inexperienced counterparts, especially in localities where non-consensual marriage practices are common and legal knowledge is low, and (ii) considering

programmes and grants to cover lawyers' fees, such that socio-economically disadvantaged families can access the legal system.

Specific recommendations

To the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To enforce implementation of the provisions stipulated in international conventions such as "On the Rights of the Child", "On the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages", and "On the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women", which all condemn the practices of bride abduction and child marriage; To establish a cross-sector Working Group under its auspices, which would include representatives of the main ministries, government agencies, NGOs and professional organisations. The intention of the group would be to develop strategies to address the problem of child marriage and bride abduction, while incorporating appropriate mechanisms for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of its work. In cases where such a strategy already exists, analysis of its effectiveness and challenges needs to be undertaken. Step-by-step operational procedures must be developed which prescribe the course of action which should be followed by front-line professionals when faced with child marriage and *ala kachuu*.

To the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To support the draft law "On amendments and additions to selected legislative acts of the Kyrgyz Republic" (Family and Criminal Codes of the Kyrgyz Republic). The Kyrgyz Government has included into the National Plan of Action for Achieving Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic for the years 2015-2017 the adoption of a bill that bans religious officiation of marriage without prior official registration by a public body, approved by decree R786 dated 11.20.2015. This bill serves as a special measure, which takes into account the prevalence of religious authorisation of marriage without legal registration, an issue which is specific to the Kyrgyz Republic. It does not duplicate criminal law but fills gaps in the Criminal Code and brings to justice dishonest parents and religious clerics.

2. To introduce changes and amendments to the Legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic which will introduce criminal liability for accomplices of the practices, including the parents, relatives, friends and others from both sides;

3. To introduce changes and amendments to the Criminal Procedures Code (the new edition of the Code of Criminal Procedures) to enable public charges to be brought under Articles 154 and 155 of the Criminal Code (abduction of girls and women); To introduce measures of control over implementation of the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic and the commitments made at an international level to eradicate the practices of abduction of girls and early-age marriage.

To the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To enhance the capacity and gender sensitivity of health professionals (at all levels of the health system), including ensuring proper documentation of cases of violence against women and girls;

2. To improve and increase awareness-raising activities regarding the prevention of early-age marriage, associated risk behaviour among adolescents, and sexual crimes against minors, in collaboration with state organisation, youth groups and NGOs;

3. To make possible implementation of the Law "On state social order" of July 21, 2008 N 162, and, with the involvement of NGOs, support the implementation of projects aimed at transforming harmful cultural traditions and rituals through educational activities and counteracting violations of girls' rights;

4. To link the efforts of the state health and education systems in the areas of reproductive health and family planning education (for pupils of 8th-11th grades, including pupils of children's homes and boarding schools, especially in rural areas).

To the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To carry out gender analysis of textbooks and other training materials to identify stereotypes that contribute to discrimination and violence against girls and women;

2. To increase the capacity and gender sensitivity of representatives of the education system (at all levels of education);

3. To develop and integrate into school curricula a special course on "Human Rights - Women's Rights" which would include reproductive rights;

4. To conduct monitoring of the activities of school psychologists and social workers in order to assess their experience in responding to cases of early-age marriage and abduction of girls.

To the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To enhance the capacity of law enforcement officers to effectively investigate and prosecute perpetrators of gender-based crimes;

2. To develop and bring into practical use a manual for law enforcement bodies on the effective investigation of crimes against girls and women (focusing on early-age marriage and bride abduction);

3. To develop a set of clear official instructions outlining the specific actions to be taken in order to address and handle cases of bride abduction and child marriage;

4. To introduce a system of incentives for the criminal disclosure of criminal cases of bride abduction and child marriage;

5. To introduce a system of rotation for district officers, with terms not exceeding six months;

6. To introduce preventive activities to counteract child marriage and bride abduction into the regular work of the State Inspectorate for Minors.

To the State Agency for Local Governance and Inter-ethnic Relationships in the Kyrgyz Republic

1. To conduct gender training for the heads of local government administrations in order to improve the situation of girls and women;

2. To carry out analysis of the work by local government bodies aimed at eradicating bride abduction and child marriage;

3. To introduce gender budgeting into the work of local government bodies, including specific targeting of financial resources to reduce bride abduction and child marriage;

4. To introduce religious registration of marriages in the registry offices (ZAGS).

To civil society

1. To monitor implementation of the final recommendations in relation to the internationally binding obligations of the Kyrgyz Republic to eradicate bride kidnapping and child marriage;
2. To initiate creation of or intensify the work of response groups to counteract child marriage and bride abduction;
3. To involve all representatives of civil society in the discussion of draft laws on the eradication of bride abduction and child marriage;
4. To participate in prevention work to eradicate bride abduction and child marriage.

To Mass Media

1. To conduct journalistic investigations and report on cases of ala kachuu and child marriage;
2. To actively raise awareness among the population in relation to reproductive rights, values and attitudes;
3. To provide wide coverage of criminal cases and court decisions in relation to child marriage and bride abduction;
4. To present cases of good examples and violence-free families.

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