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Bound to be Grooms: The Imbrication of Economy, Ecology, and Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan

Dr Elena Kim (American University of Central Asia)

Dr Frank G. Karioris (University of Pittsburgh)

Abstract

This paper examines the intersections between gender, violence, and human security through the practice of *ala kachuu* (aka bride kidnapping) in rural Kyrgyzstan. This case requires a broader and more nuanced approach to looking at the links between various forms of insecurities and gender violence expressed through the practice of *ala kachuu* than previous literature has provided. Following Shepherd (2008), the article contends that violence is both gendered and gendering and “it is one of the sites where culturally and historically specific understandings of gender as a power relationship are reproduced” (Shepherd, 2008, p. 50).

In particular, this paper looks at men's experiences in situations of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan to shed new light on understandings of this violent practice and the gendered dynamics at play. Bride kidnapping is the process of kidnapping a woman and forcing her into marriage. In Kyrgyzstan, the practice of bride kidnapping has reemerged in the Post-Soviet period, often as an expression of bringing back 'traditional' culture. While the practice is technically illegal, the enforcement of the law is limited, for a variety of reasons. This practice, often discussed on its own, is part of a large-scale system of roles and regulations that constrain the actors in a variety of ways (Kim, 2016).

Building on human security scholarship and the work of Borbieva (2012) and Kim (2016), this paper shows a lack of engagement in the literature related to men's roles and relations within the bride kidnapping process. It is important to understand the structural and institutional inequalities which make such resistance unrecognized and less agentic. We pay attention to analysis such as Carpenter (2006) who demonstrates the need for analysis of men's vulnerability to gender-based violence in armed conflicts, this paper shifting the analysis to a non-militarized context where violence takes shape as unsanctioned rituals cast as 'tradition'. Through an analysis of interviews with men who have been involved in bride kidnappings and in-depth fieldwork throughout various parts of Kyrgyzstan, this paper builds a complex and nuanced portrait of the broader system of relations and roles that comprise the process of bride kidnapping. In this paper we argue for the need for further research and analysis of the roles that men play in these interactions, and how these roles are not simply one of men's simple exertion of authority, but are more complicated than they might at first appear.

This paper argues for the need to complicate narratives surrounding *ala kachuu* and to put these practices into wider perspective, particularly related to changes in pastoralism and livestock and social importance given to marriage. Bringing these together, the paper argues that through a wider angle view we are better able to understand *ala kachuu* as part of wider changes linked to ecological and economic changes.

Introduction

This article takes a critical perspective on the intersection between gender, violence, human security through an empirical examination of the practice of *ala kachuu* (aka bride kidnapping) in rural Kyrgyzstan. Building on this, the article shows that human insecurities work to incite violence in gendered ways and structure gender relations through a construction of gender wrapped in violence. The findings require a broad and nuanced approach to looking at the links between various forms of insecurities and gender violence expressed through the practice of *ala kachuu* than previous literature has provided. Following Shepherd (2008), the article contends that violence is both gendered and gendering and “it is one of the sites where culturally and historically specific understandings of gender as a power relationship are reproduced” (Shepherd, 2008, p. 50). Further, utilizing Tripp’s (2013) work, we believe that a human security approach allows for a better understanding not only of how women’s security can be enhanced but also that of men because these are often also affected by social constructions of masculinity that may force them into violence and conflict.

Just as we need to move away from conceptualizing women as inherently and perpetually vulnerable, we refuse to reify an essentialized notion of men as strictly perpetrators and agree with those who treat masculinity as a “discursive and programmatic gap in the human security literature” (Carpenter, 2006, 84) in exploring *ala kachuu*. This is especially important as we recently learnt from scholars like Teachout (2017) and Kim (2016) about various resistance mechanisms women exhibit within *ala kachuu*. That said, it is important to understand the structural and institutional inequalities which make such resistance unrecognized and less agentic. We pay attention to analysis such as Carpenter (2006) who encourages observers to look at men’s vulnerability to gender-based violence in armed conflicts, while the analysis in this article shifts the discussion to a non-militarized context where violence takes shape as

unsanctioned rituals cast as ‘tradition’. It may seem incongruous to claim that Kyrgyz men who kidnap women are victims in any way, as it has been widely accepted that only a positive actor in the act can be conceptualized as a victim, regardless of the level of coercion involved for the men. Yet, this article sets out to prove that despite the fact that women are more likely to be victimized while men are more likely to be perpetrators, a subtle taking of accounts the experiences of both men and women needs to be completed for a full picture of the practice of ala kachuu and its relation to gender orders. Therefore, the article argues for a more nuanced and complex positioning of women and men within the victim-perpetrator continuum and that the empirical case of ala kachuu provides a strong case study for doing so.

This article will first set out important contextual and culturally elements, which are necessary for an understanding of the broader society in which ala kachuu takes place. This will be followed by an elaboration of a standard example of bride kidnapping. We will then examine the extant literature on the topic. The sections following this will build on empirical research on bride kidnapping, discussing methodology and providing insights from interviews with men on this topic. The last sections of the article detail the ways that ala kachuu is intertwined with masculinity, marriage, and social and economic changes.

Context & Methodology

Set within the heart of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is a diverse country with a wide set of ethnic and religious populations. The primary and dominant group are the Kyrgyz (representing the titular nation). They represent a group that is internally diverse, historically and in the present. Made up of various tribes, Kyrgyz people have traditionally been a nomadic people, with strong influences to this day. The World Nomad Games are hosted in Kyrgyzstan, drawing participants globally, and is made up of various events or sports that nomads traditionally played.

Linguistically, Kyrgyz – the language – is a Turkic language, having strong connections with both Uzbek and Kazakh. Though this is the traditional language in the country, the primary language differs geographically; with Russian being a primary language in the capital Bishkek. This is due to Kyrgyzstan being both a former Russian and Soviet colony. Relatedly, there is a large population of ethnic Russians within the country.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, Kyrgyzstan has struggled economically and with the process of modernization in a variety of ways. Unlike its neighbor Kazakhstan which has had an economic boom – based on oil reserves – Kyrgyzstan is economically weak, with much of the population living in rural areas. This has impacted on the social structures and cultural systems and the changes they have made in the past thirty years since independence.

Traditionally, Kyrgyz culture is both patrilineal as well as patrilocal. While this is no longer followed entirely in urban centers, in rural areas these practices are still followed for the most part. Related to each of these components, in relation with each other, Kyrgyz society is still highly connected to local communities and tied relations within this community.

The analysis in this article draws upon primary data collected within a larger national-level study on gender and violence conducted throughout Kyrgyzstan in 2016-2017. Through use of qualitative fieldwork, the research team sought to explicate the complex processes, practices, and lived realities of sexual and gender-based violence. The data was collected through a combination of both semi-structured interviews and surveys. This nationwide work used purposive sampling to identify and recruit participants, often in close consultation with local community leaders, who had experience some aspect of bride kidnapping. Research was conducted throughout the country, taking place in seven provinces and two major cities. In total, twenty-one case studies of bride kidnapping from rural and urban areas made up the data. Each case study represents not just a single interview, but comprises various members of the

community who were connected to the case. Over the twenty one cases, the number of interviewees varied between one and eleven people.

In conducting research on bride kidnapping and sexual and gender-based violence, all precautions were taken to ensure the protection of informants at all stages of the research and dissemination of findings. As part of this, all identifying details have been changed to protect informants' anonymity and informants have been given pseudonyms. Mary Ellsberg and Lori Heise note the importance of research ethics when addressing issues of sexual violence, due to, in part, the “potentially threatening and traumatic nature of the subject” (Ellsberg & Heise 2002, 1599). Further, as the research is intrinsically related to sexual and gender-based violence, the researchers recognize the ethics concerns in even asking about these matters (Becker-Blease & Fleyd 2006).

Bride kidnapping as a Practice/Process

In an oral history taken in 2009, one woman said, “In 1954, when I was 19, I got married to a man who stole me from my parents” (Tranum 2009, p. 201). These practices have, in varied ways, existed over a long period of time. That said, the particular iterations, practices, and impact that they have is a far more recent reality. Bride kidnapping is a widely practiced custom, from Central Asia into the Balkans, Turkey, and Greece. The set of practices that take place in Kyrgyzstan are distinct – to a degree - from those that take place in other regions.

Non-consensual abduction of women for forced marriage (*ala kachuu*) is comprised of specific and standard steps and actions with the involvement of various groups of actors. A recent report compares the process with a relay race where different individuals enforce an action upon the kidnapped women and pass her as the baton to others (Kim, 2016). The practice is often described as a group of men capturing a woman, sometimes as young as 12 years old (HRW,

2016), through deception and physical force. After this, they bring her to the home of the kidnapper. At the house, the groom's female relatives 'receive' her, put her inside a designated space separated from the rest of the room with a curtain. Before she is put there, these women must ensure that a white headscarf is put on her head which signals her acceptance of the marriage. The kidnappers' female relatives exert physical force, intimidation, psychological pressure to coerce the woman to agree. Kidnapped women plea, cry, fight, resist and ask to be let go. Borbieva (2012) argues that women must perform these behaviors because this is a way to assert their innocence and honor and because they are expected to show no eagerness to marry. A recent study (Kim, 2016), on the other hand, claims that severe psychological damage results from this event. She mentions that the captured women report feeling shocked, humiliated, fearful, guilty, angry, helpless, hopeless, grieving, confused and even suicidal.

In terms of the process, while kidnapped women often fight their way out, older male relatives of the kidnappers are sent to the women's parents. This group is referred to as '*bazar achu*'. They bring apologies, gifts and formally ask for their blessings. The parents may give their daughters permission to leave but most often they instruct her to stay. It is typical for women to marry the kidnappers if their parents tell them to do so. When a woman decides to marry her kidnapper herself she would send a written message with the *bazar achu* where she informs them that she agrees to stay in the kidnapper's house. Upon receiving agreements from all the parties, a Muslim cleric (*Imam*) will be invited to officiate the Muslim marriage ceremony called '*nikah*', after which the couple is considered to be officially married.

As a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report (2006) and Kim (2016) indicate, rape is frequently used as an instrument to coerce the women to stay. In this case, women are shamed and prevented from returning home because they are expected to be virgins. Some of the women are raped on their wedding nights. Even if the women are not raped, she would be suspected to

have had sex with her kidnapper, thus, suffer and be ostracized by her community and impaired from building a new life with a different husband (HRW, 2006).

Both within Kyrgyzstan and in other contexts where forms of bride kidnapping occurs, there are also more ritualized kidnapping practices. These are generally a set of social practices related to customs that are enacted as a ritual where everyone involved is both aware of and in agreement with the actions being undertaken. While this practice does also occur in Kyrgyzstan, and while it is often challenging – post-fact – to deduce what percentage are ritual kidnappings, this article specifically looks at the practice of non-consensual *ala kachuu*. Thus, the argument relates to situations where consent has not been gained – from either the woman (bride) or her relatives.

Understanding Bride Kidnapping

While the literature that tries to make sense of bride kidnapping is diverse and nuanced, it is still insufficient to fully understand this complex phenomenon. The functional social analysis associated ‘marriage by capture’ with beginning of cultural evolution which made it a necessity in the context of appreciation of exogamous marriages in the circumstances of poor relationships with outside tribes (McLennan, 1970; Barnes, 1999). The theorists reviewed by Barnes (1999) understand kidnapping as a rite of passage, or of bride’s subjection to her parents or her sorrow over leaving her home and family. In Herzfeld’s research in Greece (1985), kidnapping was a way for young men to show their masculinity and ingenuity to his future relatives. In Herzfeld research, kidnapping though was often disguised as elopement. Handrahan (2005) studied bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and argued that it served the men to assert their ethnic and masculine identity. Scholars like Ayres (1974), Ahearn (2001) emphasize kidnapping’s utilitarian function which allowed poor men to marry women with more resources or simply secure a wife (Kiefer,

1974). Ahearn (2001), Werner (2009), McLaren (2001) also considered kidnapping as a way to minimize or avoid expected financial costs of marriage. Stross (1974) sees kidnapping as an outcome of the situation where much is vested in marriage. Other observers accentuated economic aspect of bride kidnapping where poor rural families needed extra workers such as young wives and children to contribute to labor (Ibraeva et al., 2011). Borbieva (2012) observes that marriage “marks a change of status, when young men and women become adults and full members of a community, therefore, gaining access to new material and social resources” (p. 149). She explains the practice as serving a mediating role to ease generational tensions between elders and young people within families caused by different understandings of authority, love and marriage. Fannina Halle and Grant (2005) framed bride kidnapping as part of the civilization mission and colonial rule in Central Asia through analysis of the Soviet efforts to prohibit this practice seen as indicative as the local barbarism. It was also interpreted as a form of violence against women and girls, both a contributing factor and a product of patriarchal misogyny. Recent sources associate it with male dominance (Klenibach et al., 2005), “mechanism for men to assert and maintain power over women” (Werner, 2009, p. 328), “over female mobility and female sexuality” (315).

We are concerned with how ala kachuu has become a normalized form of violence against women and contributes to participating in a culture that accepts it and leaves it in impunity and even creates a perception that such violence is simply a tradition or even a form of entertainment. In this article, we are broadening the understand of ala kachuu from the perspective of human security to critically explore its relationships to gender-based violence, demonstrating how gender and violence are related and how violence is gendered and produces gender. We focus on ala kachuu as an entry point into understanding it as a gendered human security phenomenon. We see ala kachuu as a useful case for interrogation to understanding how

gender is “constituted and reconstituted in a dynamic fashion through human insecurity” (Shepherd, 2008, p. 16). In this way this article contributes to not only literature on the topic but work that has seeking to reduce occurrences of the practice (Kleinbach and Babaiarova 2013).

Ala kachuu: Shame, guilt and pressures

Following a gendered approach to human security (Tripp, 2013), we focus on linkages between various forms of human insecurity. In the below section we expose inequalities that are both created by various insecurities and simultaneously create them. Insecurities are context specific and we analyze those in a concrete space and time in Kyrgyzstan. The article examines conflicting intersection between masculinity, the post-communist transition to market economy, and shifts in rural pastoral production to argue that the combination of these factors has resulted in many male youths seeking alternative practices as part of their response to this tension. We argue that ala kachuu, among other practices, has become an integral part of their livelihood strategies thus creating a cycle of violence with profound effects on human security of women, men, and children. Our aim is to move away from simplistic notions of autonomous male kidnappers towards a nuanced and contextualized understanding of who the kidnappers are, how they become kidnappers, how they feel being kidnappers, and how this relates to broader contexts. In producing such an analysis, we explore the relations of rural male youth within their families and communities in the context of drastic shifts in social, political, economic and cultural life that determined the role of young men within their society and accompanying demands for recognized masculinity in a transitioning society, economic uncertainty and declining institutions.

Our analytic objectives are informed and draw upon interviews with Kyrgyz men, young and older, who had become married with the use of ala kachuu. We noted recurrence of stories of

ala kachuu which contradicted a traditional discourse of dominant men expressing their determinate individual choices. Instead, these stories articulated ala kachuu as a practice imbricated in broader social, economic and political contexts and the roles of kidnappers as much more complicated than an essentialized ‘perpetrator’. For example, Chingiz, a young man in his early twenties, stated that after the kidnapping and marriage “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.” His account shows that ala kachuu presented young men not only the challenge to overcome but a process which they actively wished to avoid and cast him further towards shame. Another groom, Emil, talks about the ways that his experience of kidnapping unmoored him from certainty and, in a fashion, his masculinity. He says that:

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 odd. 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.

Stories like Emil’s are many and what they illustrate demand a renewed understanding of ala kachuu that pries away from the traditional focus on the titular bride and her (forced) involvement in the process. Another man, Amir, in his late teens to early twenties, stated that “I got married very early. The idea of getting married belonged to my parents because I was the oldest son of the family.” Amir continues, saying that “my parents didn’t tell me who I should marry” and that “If I had a girlfriend, I should talk to her about marriage.” He admits following this that “I was shy to tell my parents that I didn’t have a girlfriend. So, I went to another neighboring village, picked up a girl, whom I liked by her looks, and kidnapped her.” Rather

than addressing a weakness or lack, Amir responds to the situation via the culturally acceptable channel of kidnapping, ending his comment saying, “And now we live happily.”

This is not to say that we never encountered respondents whose answers were direct as by Zheenbek, a man in his thirties who had kidnapped his wife nearly a decade prior, who said directly “I was forced to kidnap her. I do not justify myself. I tried to make friends with her, but she was not interested.” But even these kinds of responses, illustrating what can be seen is a far more of an individual decision based on lack of ability, shine a light on the foundation of the marital practices in these instances which require an understanding that is more complex than the conceptual division ‘perpetrator/victim’ allows. In an attempt to generate this kind of knowledge, we produce an analysis which revolves around three intersecting components. One deals with pastoral production and changes recurrent in these processes. Second, it focuses on marriage and its role in the establishment of masculinity. Third, it shows how *ala kachuu* has become intricately embedded in the practices which address the challenges posed by the two.

Masculinity, Pastoral Production and Ongoing Pressures

It is our understanding that Kyrgyz masculine identity, as elsewhere in the world, is socially constructed fluid and plural (Connell 2005; Kimmel, 2008). Achieving some level of financial independence, having a family and supporting it financially are seen as social requirements for achieving manhood in Kyrgyzstan, like in many other places. As in other places, full ‘adulthood’ is granted not upon an age but after the man is married. This process, though, in Kyrgyzstan, is linked and delimited by historical practices related to nomadic agro-pastoral lives. In this sense, gendered lives are simultaneously enwrapped in the changes of the season and the movement of livestock between higher pastures in the wintertime and lower settlements in summers (Crewett, 2012). About eighty percent of agricultural land in Kyrgyzstan

is classified as pastures and more than sixty percent of Kyrgyz population rely on livestock for their primary source of income with pastures being the basis for livestock breeding (Matter of Trust 2017). Livestock is the backbone and also the currency of the traditional, economic, social and political systems. It is treated as capital stock, as a kind of insurance against hunger, potential hardship, etc., and can be turned into cash or used as direct payment (Kim, 2014). Cattle are the main food during various and numerous traditional (always lavish) celebrations and gatherings which are important part of cultural life in Kyrgyzstan. Cattle, especially horses, also are seen as highly prestigious gifts demonstrating status and authority of the givers as well as their generosity and loyalty to the recipients. In some rural areas, cattle are also central to bride's wealth.

The interrelation between humans and animals has deep reaching impacts, including the gendered division of labor, with women and men playing distinct but important roles as dictated not only by the traditional order but also by the practical considerations and requirements of the shepherd lifestyle. As Kim (2014) notes, one informant burst into laughing at the researcher's suggestion that a male shepherd would migrate to dzhailoo alone and explained that "it is impossible. They never do it". Indeed, herders migrate with families to the alpine pasture lands (called "dzhailoo") and spend there up to eight months per year. Men herd animals while women milk cows, process dairy products, make winter supplies, maintain the family yurt (dome-shaped felt tents), take care of poultry, etc. (Kim, 2014).

Pastoral production is important for men's masculine identities because it is men who are considered to be the heads of their households, owners of the livestock and in charge of their farms and the cultural imperatives of achieving manhood through financial independence include successful livestock breeding where success is defined not only in terms of income and quantity of the cattle but men's participation in related activities. As livestock owners and herders, men

engage in a number of male-only activities indispensable to their pastoral masculine identity. Herding, for instance, involves high risk activities or homosocial leisure by males-only groups comprised of neighbors, relatives or friends who travel long distances in teams, migrate their livestock, scout for water, protect it from hazards, diagnose and treat veterinary diseases, share lodging and food, sometimes drink alcohol, play cards, e.g. They also make important decisions about livestock trade, purchase, social exchange, etc. Cattle and sheep marketplaces ‘bazaars’ are run by men who do perform the selling and purchase of the livestock. Negotiations, informal deals, socializing and creating of networks happen at these spaces and no women are allowed to enter those. Being able to successfully participate in these activities are also defining features of a successful herder. Young men begin their pastoral careers by accompanying their fathers to dzhailoos as children and learning from them about the profession. When they grow older, they can become independent agropastoral farmers, set up their own yurt and own livestock. Livestock are part of the socializing process that move young men into recognized manhood.

While rural Kyrgyz masculinity is constructed around the owning and maintenance of livestock, pastoral interrelations between humans and animal production has become increasingly difficult as the country has come further under the auspices of neoliberalism, while continuing to have issues of poverty, with more than 25% living under the national poverty line (Asian Development Bank 2019). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transhumance as a system has drastically declined. Institutions created to support the livestock sector in the Soviet Union such as seed, forage and crop production, veterinary medicine, research and educational institutions also declined in its operation after 1990s and no more financial and technical resources were any longer channeled to Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet national budget (FAO, 2015). Basic maintenance of infrastructure such as roads and bridges to access distant pastures and plumbed water resources also faded, increasing thereby proneness to landslides and

other hazards (Hirsch et al, 2010). Deteriorating environmental and socio-economic situation in rural areas as well as pasture management reforms have been limiting livestock mobility and impacted its quantity and quality (Robinson et al 2003). As a result, cattle and sheep became heavily concentrated in low and medium altitudes causing overgrazing, pasture degradation, erosion of soil and result in loss of vegetation, soil compaction and erosion (MAWRPI et al 2008) leading to a decrease in the quality and quantity of livestock.

Decayed pastoral production has profoundly affected rural livelihoods and, among other things, had an important and serious impact on young men's social and economic roles within their families and communities and their status of men. It severely undermined their ability to provide for family and to own assets, one of the most basic components of masculine identity. Their ability to organize and take part in the social and cultural life within their villages where much depends on whether one has animals has been reduced. Young men's opportunities to participate in masculine spaces became fundamentally limited. Without the herds, they struggle to become independent herders, own livestock and engage in pastoral production. They experience difficulties to move into more diversified economic life not based on livestock. Some young men find alternatives such as labor migration which is perceived as a temporary solution and frequently does not fulfill the expectations for improved finances.

Increased importance of marriage

As securing pastoral livelihood becomes more difficult, the importance of marriage as a defining tenant of masculine identity increased. Unlike the process of pastoral production and its threats, the process of marriage may appear as rendering men more in control and autonomy and by becoming married the young men can receive some socially recognize status and independence. Interestingly, however, young men's ability to marry has also been harshly

affected by declining pastoral production as young women and their families resist joining families with meager financial perspectives. In this, a groom is typically expected to pay a bridewealth which often also comes in the form of livestock and cattle. His ability to do so is also jeopardized by stagnant pastoralist economy. The predicament becomes circular because becoming an independent pastoral producer is tightly linked to young men's marital status where their being married is a prerequisite to their start of autonomous lives. An inability to attract a consenting spouse added to the risk of their perpetual boyhood severely sanctioned by the society and excluding them from the normative economic, social and political order.

One can see a similar issue as Bourdieu analyzes in his book *Bachelor's Ball* (2007), where he details the changing gender relations in southern France. Hanna Rosin describes the book's argument: "The eldest sons once held the privileges of patrimonial loyalty and filial inheritance in Béarn. But over the decades, changing economic forces turned those privileges into curses. Although the land no longer produced the impressive income it once had, the men felt obligated to tend it" (2010). In this way Bourdieu points towards stagnating roles for sons tied to agricultural obligations that do not mete out the stable conditions they had in previous generations.

Such dilemma is often not contained with an individual young man but becomes generalizable to the young men's families. For many rural Kyrgyz parents, having an unmarried adult son is recognized as a both their parental neglect and their unnatural lack of interest in their own progeny. It is not surprise thus that parents are interested in having their sons married and exert pressures on their sons using another cultural imperative of a 'good son' and a related idea that 'a good son is a real man' which also constitutes an important tenant of a men's aspired identity that comes into place. As a result, an unmarried young man's masculine identity faces

additional pressures. Amir's story described above is glaringly demonstrate such pressures.

Another man's, Azamat, older sister talked about how he became 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).

Azamat's marriage demonstrates a number of important observations. One is the man's obviously minimal role in making decisions about not only whether but also whom to marry. Second is the active role of the women in the family. Three, it also illustrates the for the man's family, his marriage is conflated by obtaining a *kelin* in the house for the household rather than him becoming married. To support this, in interviews with parents of the groom we often heard the expression such as "kyz aldyk" which translates as "we brought a girl" as synonymous to their son's marriage. We explain more below.

Having a *kelin* in the house is part of an honorable Kyrgyz womanhood and manhood for the parents of the young man. Rural families in Kyrgyzstan exercise marriages with patrilocal residence where incoming daughters-in-law (*kelins*) occupying special position and functions within the extended multi-generational households. These include not only domestic and reproductive labor of *kelins* but also bringing with them social recognition and status for the receiving family. Lived-in *kelins* are the sources of pride. As one young man's mother proudly explained when her son kidnapped a girl for marriage, neighbors started visiting her to congratulate her. She was pleased and gladly accepted her guests' delight as they said that "from

that moment on she could spend her life by sitting on cushions (toshoks) and drinking tea served to her by the new young daughter-in-law". Kelin brought them a lifestyle in which they took pride, desired status, honor and respect they automatically attain. Marriage, contradictorily, for these young Kyrgyz men, serves to be an essential tenant of socially constructed masculinity but it is also imbued with bluntly depriving him of his agency, control and domination, all the core descriptions of normative manhood. These masculine features will be required in the actual act of kidnapping and in relation to his bride-to-be.

Indeed, *ala kachuu* is a process full of risk, thrill and violence, including sexual violence, and as such brings recognition and important respect for bravery and prowess not only from young men's families but also from within the men's peer group. Aggression, violence, forcefulness and sexual domination inherent in the practice, even unlawfulness of it - all contribute to the image of male power worth of respect. Successful bride kidnapping brings such a status and this kind of violence is accorded cultural importance.

Conclusions

Exploring *ala kachuu* as a specific practice of gender-based violence in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, we follow feminist security scholars to problematize the rigid and gendered conceptualization of violence based on unexamined and simplistic association of war with masculinity and peace with femininity and the related essentializing assumptions about men's natural function as fighters, protectors or perpetrators and women's automatic capacity and desires to provide care and/or necessarily fall prey to violent men. All of these have been so characteristically used in the international security discourse informing international and local intervention programming and practices. In rural Kyrgyzstan, there is a defined path to

recognized manhood but young men often have limited agency, resources and support to fully satisfy these requirements.

Intersecting insecurities related to the overall declining economic situation in the country, deteriorated conditions of once successful pastoral production, and social pressures redefine masculinity in terms that make it difficult for male youth to achieve socially recognized manhood. In this situation, we argue, instead, that *ala kachuu* has become a part of the young men's response mechanism to erosion of pastoral livelihoods and its consequences for economic independence, and a decreased ability to become married. More generally, it has evolved as a way of coping with difficulties establishing the socially approved forms of masculinity. As hallmarks central for attaining socially recognized manhood have become increasingly difficult to realize, search for alternative routes intensified. For the young men it would not be an overstatement in this situation that importance of *ala kachuu* as a marriage strategy to transition to manhood has radically increased and in their quest for recognition of masculine identity, such form of violence has become entrenched into routine marriage strategies. *Ala kachuu*, when successful, result in marriage, the acquisition of labor force required for pastoral production, and recognition for bravery. It brings important respect from the young man's peer groups, his immediate family, relatives and neighbors.

While we have described what we saw as *ala kachuu* being an instrument and an alternative form for young men to claim power, status and recognition, we are wary that these inter-linking insecurities for male youth in Kyrgyzstan has led to extreme insecurity for Kyrgyz young women who remain subjects to constant threat of being kidnapped, raped, forced to marriage, etc., and structures their lives around a gendered insecurities. This puts under question the concept of human security in general because, as Anne Tickner (1992), a prominent feminist

scholar, has put forward, “securing means nothing if it is built upon insecurity of others” (in Tripp, 2008, p. 17).

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