

**Bride-Kidnapping in Kazakhstan in Discourses of  
Law and Custom, Nationalism and Tradition,  
Kinship and Gender**

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*Submitted to*  
*Central European University*  
*Department of Gender Studies*

In partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender  
Studies

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Budapest, Hungary

2009

## **Abstract**

The present thesis examines the marital practice of bride-kidnapping in Kazakhstan. It traces how the practice evolved throughout history from the pre-socialist state to the independent one. The outcome of the research contributes to understanding of the factors that sustain the practice in contemporary Kazakhstan. The research is based on the analysis of the interviews with bride-kidnapped women and their families. The analysis of interviewees' experiences within the theoretical frameworks of kinship relations reveals the role of patrilineal kinship system in the reinforcement of the marital practice of bride-kidnapping. The analysis extends further through examining of the state and law involvement in the issues of bride-kidnapping and reveals its ineffectiveness. It also demonstrates people's unwillingness to seek support and protection in law and state within the discourse of bride-kidnapping.

## Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to all people who contributed to my project.

My special gratitude to my supervisor **Elissa Helms** for her deep involvement and constructive criticism that assisted in realization and improvement of my research

My love and gratitude to:

My mother, **Gulchekhra**, and father, **Husan** for their help, love and support

My friend **Kai** for his constant emotional and intellectual support during the whole academic year and his friendship

My special gratitude to my special person **Miroslav** for his understanding, care, support and encouragement

# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1- Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Historical Background.....	1
1.2 Theoretical Framework.....	1
1.3 Research Description.....	4
<b>Chapter 2 – Methodology</b> .....	6
2.1 Methodological Process of the Research.....	6
2.2 My Position as a Researcher .....	8
2.3 Introduction to the Interviewees’ Life Stories .....	10
<b>Chapter 3 - Bride-kidnapping: a New Start or Continuity of Subjugation?</b> .....	18
3.1 The Plans and Perspectives of Women before Bride-kidnapping and Changes this Act Brings into their Lives .....	18
3.2 The Vision of Ideal Marriage or Attitudes towards the Act of Bride-kidnapping .....	26
<b>Chapter 4 - Roles of Kinship Relations in Arranging Marriages</b> .....	33
4.1 Children/ Parents Relationships before and after Marriage.....	33
4.2 The “High status” of Elderly Women within the Rules of Patrilineal Descent .....	40
<b>Chapter 5 - The position of Bride-kidnapping within the Framework of Politics and State Power</b> .....	46
5.1 The Frequency of Bride-kidnapping in Contemporary Kazakh Society .....	53
5.2 The Role of the State Policies and their Effectiveness in the Discourse of Contemporary Bride-kidnapping .....	55
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	65
<b>Reference List</b> .....	69

# Chapter 1- Introduction

## ***1.1 Historical Background***

Marital discourse in many countries inevitably interweaves with the traditions and customs of those countries' peoples. The marital practices in different cultures presuppose a variety of activities which seem to be odd and obscure to other cultures. The present research deals with the marital ritual which has been practised in many countries of Central Asia. Bride kidnapping, or marriage by abduction, has been a long-standing and time-honoured custom for Central Asian societies particularly Kazakhstan (Diamond 2002). The way this practice manifested itself was that a man abducted a woman and made her his wife irrespective of her will. Bride kidnapping continues to be a marital rite in Kazakhstan. How this practice evolved and what position it occupies within the wider framework of marriage and family in contemporary Kazakhstan are the issues that are in the focus of the present research.

The particular interest of my research is how the women who were subject to bride kidnapping and their families consider this ritual, and to what extent their attitudes are shaped by social and political processes, and what these processes are. To understand what role and position bride-kidnapping occupies in the women's lives of Kazakhstan, I seek to reveal the factors that sustain the practice of bride-kidnapping.

## ***1.2 Theoretical Framework***

Most of the research on bride kidnapping in Central Asia was done in Kyrgyzstan by researchers such as Lori Handrahan and Russell L. Kleinbach. There is even the movie by Petr

Lom “The Kidnapped Bride” that deals with the rite of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. The research that has been done by these authors leave space to doubt the way this marital practice is presented. The authors tend to articulate the idea that bride-kidnapping is a coercive ritual that does not leave the bride-kidnapped women a space to resist it. The coercion of this ritual is seen in the disturbing procedures women go through during the act of bride-kidnapping. The authors tend to underscore the lack of women’s consent in the process of bride-kidnapping. By problematizing the non-consensual marriages they seek to emphasize how coercive the actions involved in the practice of bride-kidnapping are. However, by applying this representation of bride-kidnapping to the one in the context of Kazakhstan, I claim in the necessity of seeing those processes that stipulate the occurrence of the bride-kidnapping in the first place. My study seeks to question the role of coercion and consent in the discourse of bride-kidnapping. By focusing on the preconditions of this act I extend the role of those two concepts beyond the limits of the bride-kidnapping act.

The research that has been done on the practice of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan may contribute to examining of this very practice within Kazakhstan cultural context. The state condition in Kyrgyzstan is relatively close to that of Kazakhstan as both countries, along with other Central Asian republics, have undergone the process of transformation from the socialist state to the independent one. Thus, the similarities which may occur in the discourse of bride-kidnapping in these two countries are influential and may serve to better understanding of the involved issues.

Bride-kidnapping, in most of the research works, is considered as a case study for examining state-society relations in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. This ritual is viewed in the connection with the change that was brought into the independent states in the Central Asia

after the collapse of the Soviet Union. How this change reflected on lives of women in post-Soviet states is explored in the works of such authors as Mary Buckley (1989), Martha Brill Olcott (2002), Pauline Jones Luong (2004) and Douglas Taylor Northrop (2004). Among social processes, these authors outline the changes which led to the construction of new national identities and revision of old traditions and customs which became the part of new state policies.

Cynthia Werner (2004), exploring the transformation of Kazakhstan from the Soviet rule to independence, underscores how all the practices related to the sustaining of old traditions were restricted and limited by the state ideology. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the post-Soviet countries have attempted to rebuild new national identities but have also dismantled social welfare programs formerly guaranteed by the Soviet Union. They have built the new national identities with the ideals as distant from the ones of the former USSR as possible. This national rebuilding resulted in returning to the old patriarchal traditions, particularly to the social inequality between men and women.

Bride kidnapping is the central revisited tradition in Werner's work "Women, marriage, and the nation-state: the rise of nonconsensual bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Kazakhstan" (2004). She argues that there are three principle factors which contributed to the rise of nonconsensual bride-kidnapping. The following state policies are among them: the state policies which enforce Kazakh national culture, the disbelief in post Soviet legislation that seems to fail to maintain laws which sustain gender equality, and the poor economic situation or insecure state of the citizens. She views the practice of bride-kidnapping in terms of its close relation to the political and economical instability of the country and changes within the post-Soviet state's policy.

The analysis of bride-kidnapping presented in the works of the afore-mentioned authors views the act of bride-kidnapping within one framework of nation and state only. In my research, I intend to address the issues of bride-kidnapping by examining other frameworks within which this act is functioning. I study the ritual of bride-kidnapping within the discourses of kinship relations in Kazakhstan and the state and law involvement in the practice. These frameworks are intended to assist in understanding of other factors that reinforce the practice of bride-kidnapping.

### ***1.3 Research Description***

The empirical part of the research is based on the in-depth interviews with the bride-kidnapped women and their families. The process of transformation from the socialist state to the independent one is viewed as the main factor that resulted in the construction of new national identity along with the resurgence of traditional practices like bride-kidnapping. In this regard, through the interviewees' experience I seek to understand deeper what other factors might be involved in the practice of bride-kidnapping and if people themselves see bride-kidnapping as part of the nationalism discourse. I believe that it is possible to answer my research question only by analyzing the narratives of women, who were subject to bride-kidnapping and families who were involved in this ritual. It is essential to learn first-hand all the consequences and problems the ritual entails via conducting interviews with these people.

The research comprises three chapters with the analysis of the interviewees' in connection with the theoretical background that helps to interpret and understand the outcomes of the research. This analysis starts with the third chapter that tackles the interviewed women's life experience before and after they were bride-kidnapped. It also examines what plans and



perspectives women had had before the bride-kidnapping and how they changed afterwards. The fourth chapter focuses on the analysis of kinship relations in Kazakh families. The role of children and parents life-long dependency is discussed in relation to the act of bride-kidnapping. Women's positions within the family are in the focus of this chapter, too. This position is traced from her status of unmarried woman to the elderly woman that she gets after the marriage of her son. The last chapter discusses the role of law and state in the issues of bride-kidnapping and people's attitude towards the legal involvement of the state.

## Chapter 2 – Methodology

### *2.1 Methodological Process of the Research*

This research is based on the personal stories of the women who were subject to the act of bride-kidnapping and willing to share their experiences. The empirical data comprises not only the interviews with the women who were bride-kidnapped but with their families, too. I use the term “bride-kidnapped” separately from the term “kidnapped.” I differentiate these two terms because the former is not merely a specific type of action of the latter. These two terms have different linguistic impacts both on the legal and social levels in Kazakhstan. This information is reflected in the interviews with the women. This difference between those two is also discussed in the section where I present how the act of bride-kidnapping is considered in the framework of law and the state.

The interviews were conducted with women who were bride-kidnapped in Southern Kazakhstan Oblast, namely in Shymkent city. This city is the biggest in the South Kazakhstan Oblast, the Oblast is known as a place where people tend to follow traditions and customs zealously. For this research, I conducted six in-depth oral history interviews with bride-kidnapped women and their family members. I intended to interview both male and female members of the women’s families but only mothers of bride-kidnapped women became interviewees for the present project as the only representatives of women’s families. Other members of women’s families were not willing to give the interviews except for their mothers. Before entering the field, I did not expect that male members of women’s families would not want to participate in the research. It was interesting that fathers did not want to discuss the experience of their daughters’ bride-kidnapping. Presumably, discussion of the issues related to

bride-kidnapping is seen as “female matters” as it concerns the private sphere of Kazakh society, family. I explain this reluctance of male members of their families in the section where I discuss the role of elderly women in the families.

Women’s mothers were also reluctant to discuss their daughters’ experiences of bride-kidnapping at the beginning of the interviews. However, they changed their positions during the actual interviews. It is interesting that during the interviews, most of the women’s mothers were against leaving their daughters alone with me but wanted to hear their daughters’ stories themselves. It seemed that it was the first time for them, too, that they discussed their daughters’ bride-kidnapping. I am not quite certain of what could be the reasons of their unwillingness to leave their daughters alone with me during the interviews. However, during the actual interviews, I noticed that mothers had an authoritative position and interfered into their daughters’ stories by adding some information they considered relevant. It felt that mothers were in the position of a controlling body that restricted women or served as an obstacle for them to say more about what they had experienced. I discuss this in more detail in the particular stories of bride-kidnapped women. There were only two interviews which I managed to conduct with the women separately from their mothers. Those two interviews were more successful than the ones where the women and their mothers were interviewed together. I gained more insight into their personal lives and learned more about bride-kidnapping and its influence on their lives. Interestingly, there was much information of which the mothers did not seem be aware.

The interviews began with an open-ended question to let the bride-kidnapped women share what they considered relevant and appropriate to tell in the first place. Through the open-ended question I asked them to tell what they remembered about the act of bride-kidnapping. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions and react to

what was said by women during the interviews. Some of the topics women raised were not anticipated by me or included into the general set of questions that I prepared in advance for interviewing the bride-kidnapped women and their families. Thus, the women's stories revealed more issues to consider. Those issues made me reflect on their situations more critically. It assisted me in the analysis of their stories in the discourse of bride-kidnapping.

By using the in-depth interview method, I attempted to find the answers to the following questions: What was bride-kidnapping for those women who had experienced it? Did those women and their mothers consider its origin in law or custom or somewhere else? If they located the problem in a particular sphere, why were other spheres invisible regarding bride kidnapping? Did they see legal involvement in the issues of bride-kidnapping relevant or how did they feel about those bride-kidnapped women who sought protection in law. To answer the aforementioned questions, I analyze the narratives of women who were subject to bride-kidnapping and family members (mothers) who were involved in this ritual. It is essential to learn first-hand all the consequences and problems the ritual entails by conducting interviews with those people.

## ***2.2 My Position as a Researcher***

The interview method seemed the best one to establish a personal connection with the subjects of this rite and hear "women's voices". Moreover, while conducting my interviews, I followed the principles of feminist phenomenology. The principle when "applied to in-depth interviews/oral histories means learning to 'listen in stereo'" (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 103), i.e. to listen in such a way that a researcher positions himself/herself in the "shoes" of a respondent. Levesque-Lopman, applying this principle to the interviews she conducted for her own research, points out that it also "builds connections and avoids alienation of the researcher from the

participants...[in addition, it serves to] show that in woman-to-woman talk in the face-to-face interaction of in-depth interviews there is the possibility for ‘catch’ as an instrument for women's empowerment” (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 104). This ‘catch’ principle means being able to hear and get their reactions not only from what women say but from other elements that are part of the interview as well. These can be women’s reactions to a particular question, manner of answering or telling about a particular moment of their experience or even their unwillingness to mention some parts of their lives. Thus, I used this approach in order to achieve the afore-mentioned results from the interviews with the women and their mothers. The results helped to examine and analyse the issues involved in the discourse of bride-kidnapping. During an interview, I helped in sharing their stories by asking questions which were both compassionate and to the point at the same time. The way I organized and asked the questions was intended to help my interviewees share their bride-kidnapping experience without any compulsion, i.e. in a relaxed and free atmosphere.

This method is also used for “starting from women's *lived* experience” (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 103). It assumes the selection of experiences which, “through recollection and reflection, are given a change in attention, a new attention *a la vie*, that thus makes ‘problematic’ what had previously been taken-for-granted, or seen-but-not-noticed” (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 110). Thus, the power of life experience may be viewed as one of the tools for reconsideration of certain established paradigms. By experience, I use Louise Levesque-Lopman’s interpretation of this concept. Hence, the understanding of experience is not taken in individualistic sense by her or something characteristic of a specific person. It is something rather in a more general sense, i.e. “a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed” (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 104). This process happens under the influence of social relations within which one places

oneself or is placed. These social relations can be material, economic, and interpersonal. The process of subjectivity construction is “daily renewed” and dynamic, therefore, it is a continuous process for every person. There is no “fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction” (Levesque-Lopman 2000, 104), i.e. what Levesque-Lopman understands by the experience and the definition I use for my research. Therefore the role of women’s experience is the key for the present work. This is the process through which their subjectivity was constructed. To look at bride-kidnapping through the lens of the interviewees’ experience may help to reassess the rite or give more space for its new understanding.

### ***2.3 Introduction to the Interviewees’ Life Stories***

I now present some introductory information about my interviewees, both women and their mothers. The information includes the bride-kidnapped women’s age, educational and professional background. I also present some information concerning the act of bride-kidnapping, i.e. when they were bride-kidnapped, how and where it happened and their current marital status. This chapter outlines the stories of the interviewees according to the sequence in which the interviews were conducted, beginning with the first woman I interviewed. This wider context is intended to assist in the further analysis of my interviewee’s life experiences.

The **first participants** were **Almira** and her mother **Nurzhamal**. Almira was bride-kidnapped when she was 16. She is 19 now, working at a computer service office and studying at the Information Technology Department simultaneously. Her marriage life did not last long after she was bride-kidnapped: she left her “husband” after seven months of living together.

The act of bride-kidnapping was realized in a violent way according to the description of Almira. She could not tell the details of her bride-kidnapping as she said she did not remember anything about the act itself. Afterwards, she realized that the kidnapper and his companions had drugged her. The act occurred in Shymkent city, but the groom himself came from another city, which was not far from the one where Almira lived. He took her to his home town, to the house of his parents. The city where she had to move is considered less developed and much smaller than Shymkent. After she regained consciousness, she found many of the groom's female relatives around her who tried to persuade her to stay by means of different tricks.

One of those tricks was the story of her bride-kidnapping. Taking advantage of the fact that she did not remember anything, the unknown people told her that there had been twenty men who kidnapped her and warned her about the consequences of her refusal to stay. Almira told that she was worried what people would think if they knew that she was kidnapped by so many people. The reputation of a woman in that region is much dependent on the way of life a woman leads. Such unpleasant events like bride-kidnapping might threaten their reputation much as a bride-kidnapped woman is labeled as one who is not virgin anymore. Virginitly is a very important and determinate element of a "decent unmarried woman". Even nowadays, relatives of the groom check if a bride was a virgin after the first night. Thus, women are aware of their reputation and try to avoid gossip and stories that might spoil it. The same happened with Almira. She said that there were many factors that influenced her decision, which I discuss in subsequent chapters, but the afore-mentioned one was definitely dominant in her decision. After daily quarrels and an unbearable life with her husband, she escaped his house.

Almira lives with her mother Nurzhamal now. She admitted that coming back home was the most difficult decision in her life but to stay in the groom's family was harder. The interview

occurred in her mother's house. Almira does not have a father: he died several years ago; her mother and sister are the only people to rely on. The interview with Almira was conducted in the presence of her mother as she expressed her will to listen to her daughter's story. Despite my efforts, I did not manage to talk to them separately. It had some consequences as during the interview Almira did not talk much or tried to tell her story without answering any follow-up questions. Her mother's involvement also disturbed Almira's story as she paused or stopped telling it afterwards.

My next interviewee's name is **Aigul**; she is a neighbour of Almira's. She was bride-kidnapped when she was 18, i.e. seven years ago. She lives with her husband and with Aigul's mother **Mariyam**. They did not have any place to live after having some problems with her husband's relatives and Mariyam accepted her daughter with her husband and their son.

Aigul, telling the story of her bride-kidnapping, shared the following details. Both Aigul and her husband were from Shymkent city and stayed there after their marriage. She had dated her husband for two days. The day they got acquainted was their first date, and the second time he invited her to meet his friends. The third time, he bride-kidnapped her.

Aigul expected it to happen; she was at work when her future husband asked her out for lunch. She refused to go out but could see him and his friends from the window waiting for her till the end of working day. She saw them celebrating something with alcoholic drinks but already knew the reason of their celebration. By the end of the working day, Aigul received a call from her sister's husband, who knew her husband-to-be, and he told her that they were planning to bride-kidnap her. She was scared and called for a taxi to take her back home. She was able to leave her work place through the emergency exit and escape from the bride-kidnapper and his companions that were waiting for her. However, when the taxi left her two



steps from her house, there was the groom who took her away. She was brought to his house afterwards where the usual procedures were arranged. She did not try to leave the family after they came to the house as the groom managed to persuade her on their way to his house not to leave. He promised much and also shared how difficult his situation was as he did not have mother. Aigul agreed to stay trying to understand his position. At the moment of her bride-kidnapping, she had just finished high school and was working at the school as her parents could not afford to get a higher education for her. After the act of bride-kidnapping, she left her job because of household chores and her pregnancy.

According to Aigul, they had to move to her mother's house after five years of living with the relatives of her husband. Since that time, they live with Mariyam, Aigul's mother. The interview took place in Mariyam's house in a separate room. It was the first interview I conducted separately with each of the participants, i.e. with Aigul and her mother Mariyam. As a result, I learnt many details from both the interviewees which helped in my analysis much.

After our interview Aigul introduced me to her friend **Aigerim** who was also bride-kidnapped when she got married. Aigerim became my third interviewee with her mother **Sholpan**. Aigerim is 22 now; she was bride-kidnapped when she was 21, i.e. less than a year ago. She has a newborn girl and lives with her own family separately from her husband as the result of their unsuccessful marriage.

She had dated her ex-husband for two months but did not plan to marry him because of her parents, who were strongly against their marriage. Her husband was persistent in his decision to marry her, threatening to kidnap her at that time or commit suicide in the case of failure or her refusal. She agreed to the act of bride-kidnapping, however she thought many times about preventing it during the actual act. Aigerim was from Shymkent city where she was studying in

last year at the university. After the bride-kidnapping, she had to move to the village from where her husband was. She had serious disagreements and conflicts with her mother-in-law that caused problems in the relationship between her and her husband, as the result of which she had to get divorced. At the present moment, she lives with her own family.

The interview with Aigerim and her mother was conducted in the house of her parents. I interviewed Aigerim first separately from her mother. That was one of those rare interviews which I managed to conduct individually with bride-kidnapped women themselves. Interestingly, Aigerim's father was at home with her brother when I was conducting the interviews. But neither her father nor her brother agreed to participate in the project. Aigerim's mother explained that they were busy with some work and did not have time for my interviews.

My next interviewee's name is **Marzhan**. She is a colleague of my former professor who introduced us to each other. The interview with Marzhan happened at the house of her mother **Aizhan**, despite the fact that Marzhan had a house of her own. Marzhan has three children now and lives with her husband and his family. She was bride-kidnapped ten years ago when she was twenty. As a result of our interview, I learnt that she was not happy now and thought about divorce from her husband. Her mother lives in a village not far from the city. However, Marzhan sees her very rarely, and the interview we went to conduct was one of those rare cases when she could visit her.

She remembered the day of her bride-kidnapping that happened at the house of her husband. She was invited to his birthday party and was prevented from leaving as that was the moment when the act of bride-kidnapping occurred. Her husband's family left her there. Due to the time that passed or some other reasons, Marzhan did not share many details of her bride-

kidnapping except that she was against it. I also explain later in my work why this topic was difficult for her to discuss.

My next interviewee's name is **Maya**. She is 19 now and works at the hospital as a nurse. The act of bride-kidnapping happened only three months before our interview. The interview with Maya was also conducted in the house of her own family. **Nurzhan** is the name of her mother who also participated in the interview. I interviewed them together, i.e. neither Maya, nor her mother wanted to speak in private. However, I noticed that it was more of her mother's wish not to leave her daughter during the interview. There were no male members of the family at the moment the interviews were conducted.

Maya was very concise in her story: it was the shortest interview. Her mother did not tell much either. From that short information I learnt from her, the picture of the bride-kidnapping looked as follows. The day she met her husband for the first time, she went to the house of her friend Gulzhan. She remembered how Gulzhan got a call from a young man who wanted to get acquainted with her and asked her to go out. Gulzhan agreed to meet the man and asked Maya to join them. Maya did not want to go out but agreed after persistent persuasion of her friend. Maya and Gulzhan agreed to indicate special signs in case they did not like the man. The young man came with two of his friends and met the girls outside Gulzhan's house. They got acquainted, and after a while, the girls decided to leave as both understood by the signs that they did not like Maya's husband. However, the young men persuaded the girls through the conversation to stay and spend some time with them in the café. The next day Maya's husband again asked Gulzhan and Maya to go out to the cinema. After they went to the cinema, he took them to his house. Maya was sure that it was her friend Gulzhan whom he wanted to bride-kidnap, but only after arrival to the place, she learnt that the bride was she herself. She stayed in the family of the

bride-kidnapper after that. Maya was very positive about her marriage. Some other details of Maya's story I discuss in the subsequent chapters.

**Indira** and her mother **Bibigul** were my **last interviewees**. Indira is 26 years old now; she was bride-kidnapped when she was 16 and a student in high school. Now she has a 10 year-old girl, and she lives with her husband's family. The act of bride-kidnapping influenced her life much as she could not get higher education after finishing school. She planned to enter the university and obtain higher education after school but did not know that the parents' of her husband would not be able to afford it. Her parents helped her obtain a community college degree which is very different from the one at the university level according to the educational system of Kazakhstan. Now, she works as a nurse at the hospital.

Indira herself was not glad or eager to share the story of her bride-kidnapping as she considered that event unpleasant for both her family and herself. She explained that her parents had been against her marriage whereas she herself "wanted" to marry. However, she confessed that the act of bride-kidnapping was as unexpected for her as for her parents. It happened on her way home when she met her boyfriend who suggested to bring her to her house. She agreed and got into his car willingly. He brought her to his house instead. She did not refuse to stay afterwards. However, she found the whole procedure very disturbing.

I did not manage to talk to Indira and her mother separately. The interviews were conducted in the same room, where both the women were present. I assume that this fact influenced the willingness and openness of the interviewees to share their experiences. The tension that appeared between Indira and her parents at the day of her bride-kidnapping still seemed to exist despite the time that had passed since that period, i.e. ten years. Indira shared just general information that concerned her bride-kidnapping, however, there were phrases, thoughts

and sentences that slipped through her stories. I emphasize and discuss those tiny details in other chapters. The interview took place in her parent's house. Indira came for the lunch break to the house of her parents and agreed to tell some part of her life experience.

## **Chapter 3 - Bride-kidnapping: a New Start or Continuity of Subjugation?**

In this chapter, I study how the practice of bride-kidnapping influenced the lives of interviewed women after they got kidnapped. I was interested in how different their lives were before and after they got married in a “traditional” way. I demonstrate how women themselves imagined their future and saw their marriage before they got married. I seek to reveal what factors influenced women to make a decision to be bride-kidnapped or to stay in the family of a kidnapper in both “consensual” and “nonconsensual” bride-kidnapping. I also discuss how the border between the two is blurred in the discourse of bride-kidnapping.

The life experiences that the interviewed women shared tackled not only their after bride-kidnapping experience but also the one they had before the act. It was important to learn both sides of their lives as bride-kidnapping became one of the most important events in their experience. All those stories were different and unique at their core but had something in common that I hope would assist in understanding of many issues involved in the discourse of bride-kidnapping.

### ***3.1 The Plans and Perspectives of Women before Bride-kidnapping and Changes this Act Brings into their Lives***

Almost all interviewed women were studying at the university or at high school at the moment of their bride-kidnapping, except for Aigul and Maya who were already working after graduating from the high school. Those women who studied at high school thought about getting higher education but had to postpone or give up their plans. I present below the stories of bride-kidnapped women where they themselves share how they saw their lives before and after they

were bride-kidnapped. To my question of what lives they had before the act of bride-kidnapping occurred and how their lives changed afterwards I got the following reflections from the interviewed women.

Aigerim, for example, told me that she was studying at the university at the last year of her studies, while her husband did not have higher or professional education. After she was bride-kidnapped she became a housewife without an opportunity to further her studies, as she moved to the village, where the house of the groom's parents was. In her words:

Aigerim: Uh, it was so different... I couldn't even imagine that I would ever miss my family so much; I thought I would be glad to leave it and have a life of my own [laughing]. I was studying at the university and then it all happened....Hm, I think I just simply devoted myself to my new family....Well, I tried hard and it was difficult for me. You can imagine how difficult it can be for a city girl to move to the village and do everything what a young bride is supposed to do... I would not finish the university without the help of my parents. As I told you, I was studying when I was bride-kidnapped and it was my last year, the most important one but then it all stopped. My parents had to pay quite a lot to get it for me finally.

Me: A lot?

Aigerim: Yes, I mean they have to pay for everything, for my last year of education and [pause] for my exams as well. I couldn't do it myself I was pregnant with my girl and didn't have money of my own.

Aigerim evidently did not expect her life to change so radically after her marriage. She also said that she heard how it usually happened with other women who were bride-kidnapped. Since the interview was conducted individually with Aigerim, without involvement of any of her relatives, she felt free to express what she thought at that moment. She probably did not express it explicitly but made a hint that she was eager to leave her own family thinking of "a life of her own". That phrase seemed very surprising to me as it felt like she expected to find more space for her own life in the marriage. I connect that feeling of freedom with the myth about elderly woman's powerful position in the family. Women tend to think that they have to pass a "way to their happiness" and that way starts from marriage, i.e. from the moment when they become a

part of their husbands' families. From Aigerim's interview, it was also evident that she felt dependent on her parents, as they did a lot for her education even after she became part of another family. I discuss the parent and children relationship in a separate chapter, where I emphasize the life-long dependency of children on their parents.

Indira, the woman who was bride-kidnapped when she was still a child, 16 years old, said that her life changed completely. From a short conversation with Indira, I could understand much more from her behavior rather than from her story. By behavior I mean all those components of presenting a story like her manner of talking about certain moments of her life, phrases she added accidentally that would explicitly explain her attitude or reactions to her mother's remarks. Indira's mother interrupted her several times during the interview with her daughter by adding the information she considered relevant. Despite my efforts to concentrate the conversation on Indira, it was hard not to react or to continue interview straight with Indira and make her feel free to share everything she had to say. Therefore I tried to "catch"<sup>1</sup> from everything she expressed, something that would reveal Indira's true position and attitude to what she had experienced. As Indira explained further:

Indira: Well, I was studying at high school before I was bride-kidnapped... Oh yeah, I also used to go in for sport...

Indira's mother: Professionally by the way, she started her sport career when she was 6 and did so well and travelled a lot until that event.

Indira: ....Yes, I did, but it was so long ago and moreover... [long pause]...

Me: yes?

Indira: ... Well, that's it... After he kidnapped me, I became a house-wife and worked doing my household duties....His family did not give me education, but they gave all the rest, care, attention and love [laughing, look at her mother]. My own parents paid for my college education later, when I had my baby already... Unfortunately, I couldn't get higher education but what I have is enough for the nursery job I have now.

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<sup>1</sup> I discussed the "catch" principle as a component of feminist phenomenological approach to interviewing in the Methods chapter.



Through the concise life story of Indira, I could see her reluctance to go into details and tell more about her bride-kidnapping experience and the life she had before that act. However, I noticed that during the interview, her mother's interruption played a significant role in the interview with Indira. When Indira just mentioned about her sport experience, her mother enthusiastic remarks about that part of her life, made Indira concerned about something. She did not finish her sentence about how she felt to leave her sport career, but from her expression I could catch that she was not as enthusiastic about it as her mother. Moreover, she even looked a bit angry when her mother kept telling the details and plans they had about their daughter's future sport career. Indira also emphasized that she got care, attention and love in the family of her husband whereas her own parents gave her education. It sounded strange to me as she mentioned in her story that she got "love" there. When Indira was sharing her story, she emphasized that she found love in the new family; it sounded like she had none in her own family and said that phrase for her mother to be heard.

However, she did not feel glad about the life she got after she was bride-kidnapped. She even added that would not like such a life for her own daughter. "When my friends say to me that my daughter is 10 now and in 7 or 9 years she would be bride-kidnapped too, I become furious....[Me: what if it happens?] Then I would return her.... [Laughing]" Thus, Indira herself did not see bride-kidnapping as something she would wish for her own daughter. Her harsh statement about bride-kidnapping of her daughter just underpinned her feeling of resentment she had as the result of her bride-kidnapping experience. Surprisingly, she tried not to show that feeling in front of her mother, only those small catches I got from her behavior helped to notice it.

I think that both Indira and Aigerim did not share any positive attitude towards their experience of bride-kidnapping. Despite that Indira had “a happy family” and has lived with her husband for 10 years so far, she did express her moral disapproval about the act of bride-kidnapping. The interesting fact in both the cases, that of Aigerim and Indira, concerned women’s attitude to their own families with whom they used to live before they got married. From Aigerim’s interview it was seen that she expected to have a new life in the family of her husband, whereas Indira did not seem to be happy about the life she had before she was bride-kidnapped.

One of my other interviewees Marzhan told me much about her personal life. Interestingly, the interview with Marzhan was conducted in the house of her mother, the only place where I could take interviews with both of them. Interesting events happened during the interview with Marzhan. She was answering my questions in Kazakh when she was telling some general information, but shifted to Russian (which her mother did not understand) whenever she shared some personal details of her life. It did not seem strange to her mother. It is a usual case when people mix these two languages when they cannot explain something in one or another language. Therefore, Marzhan’s mother did not pay much attention and preoccupied herself with knitting in addition. There was even a moment when her mother left the room for some time and Marzhan started crying while sharing some personal problems she had with her husband at the present time. In Marzhan’s words:

Marzhan: And I don’t understand how it happened that I allowed him to bride-kidnap me so early; I was just 20 when he did that. He said all the time that he loved me and would do everything for me....ah, I don’t know, really, how it all happened. I didn’t plan to marry at all at that time.

Me: when did you plan to marry then?

Marzhan: ... Well, when I am 30 probably, I wanted to get a Master’s degree after graduating from the university but..... [long pause].....[starts crying]...

Me: Marzhan, if you don’t feel like telling it’s ok.

Marzhan: ... No, I just... something happened recently and I began thinking why I agreed to marry him in the first place, I never loved him...never, I thought It would feel better to have my own family and he kept telling me how much he loved me .... And I thought it was fine... I want to leave him now, but where will I go with 3 children and... I don't even have a place where I could go back. My brother married and lives with my mother and his wife. There is no place for me and my children...

Marzhan even shared some details of her intimate life, confessing that she never got sexual satisfaction from her husband and did not even know what it felt like. From Marzhan's story I noticed the sense of inevitability she had as she did not feel safe without her husband. Marzhan did not see support in her own family as she was completely separate from it now. She did not want her mother to know about everything she was feeling and concerns she had. Therefore, she switched to the language her mother could not understand and had a break of emotions at the moment when her mother was not in the room.

The conversation with my next interviewee Maya was also short as in the case with Indira. However, in contrast to Indira, Maya told the story in a very positive way, laughing and joking all the time. I need to mention here that Indira and Maya have a different marriage time period. Indira was bride-kidnapped ten years ago, while only 3 months had passed from the day of Maya's bride-kidnapping. Despite that her bride-kidnapping was absolute unexpectedness for Maya, she told her story in a very simplified way, adding phrases like "it was fine" throughout her whole story. In her words:

Maya: I didn't know him at all [laughing], moreover, I thought he wanted to bride-kidnap my friend who was his first purpose.... So, as I told you we met just three times and third time he bride-kidnapped me [laughing]...

Me: were you against?

Maya: Yes, I cried and everything but it's fine now, I stayed there [smiling]...[did you have any life plans before it happened?] sure I had both plans and a boyfriend but it all stayed in the past [thinking expression], but it will be fine [*Jaksy bolady*]...

Maya's mother: If a woman is bride-kidnapped in our society, it's difficult to come back, it's our tradition you know

Maya:... Yes, they usually stay [*Bezde sutup kalady goi*]

Maya's positive approach in telling about her bride-kidnapping experience gave me the idea that even though she might have had some difficulties she did not say about them. She repeated the phrase that everything would be good instead. According to Maya, she did not try to leave the bride-kidnapper's family even though she was against it. All she said to them was that she would call the police, but then just gave up when she got her mother-in-law's reply that it would not help and she must have known that. She also agreed with her mother about the usual women's behavior in such cases, i.e. that women do not leave the house of a bride-kidnapper. Maya did not have a chance to share the details of her story. Even though that event happened quite recently she made pauses several times saying that she did not remember those parts. I think that her mother's presence during Maya's interview played its role too. The authoritative position of her mother was evident as she interrupted and added what she wanted during her daughter's interview. It was normally accepted by Maya, moreover, she kept repeating "like my mother said" very often. Her mother was not against the marriage of her daughter and "supported" Maya's decision to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper.

Aigul, one of my interviewees, telling the story of her bride-kidnapping shared how she saw her marriage before it happened. She said that she expected the bride-kidnapping as it was a common practice among her relatives and acquaintances. To the question if she expected to be bride-kidnapped in one moment of her life, she replied "Yes, I did: there are lots of women who are bride-kidnapped, and I hear such stories every day, it is normal nowadays." For Aigul, bride kidnapping was something that she knew would happen one day. She learnt from the experience of her friends and relatives and even read some books that explained the ritual in detail. Thus,

when it happened she was not surprised or shocked, she just tried to prevent it somehow. She took a taxi to escape the bride-kidnapper and his friends but could not reach the destination as her husband bride-kidnapped her right after she left the taxi, i.e. next to her own house.

Aigul said that she had to leave her job after she was bride-kidnapped. She liked her job and it was a great success for her to get it without higher education. Aigul said that she planned to continue her education after one year of working and just needed time and some financial support for doing that. Aigul said that she missed her time, she was 25 now and it was difficult to find a job without education and work experience. She said that her husband was financially insecure and did not have higher education either. When she was leaving her job, her boss tried to convince her that she was too young for the marriage and had a high potential to develop. He was the one who taught her how to work. Despite his persuasion she left her work in 3 months after she was bride-kidnapped. It was her husband who persuaded to leave her job as she became pregnant soon after the act of bride-kidnapping. As she explained:

Aigul: My husband used to say to me, why did I need to work if he earned money himself. Hence, *I decided* to leave my job and I did not have a diploma of higher education that could guarantee my return.... After the birth of our boy, it was a great happiness for all members of his family, as he married at 30 and got a baby-boy child first. [laughing] It was a real sensation for all of us.... Yes, he did not actually want me to work, he wanted me to take care of our baby.... And by the way, I tried to work in some places after a while, but it did not last long as my husband did not want me to work at all.

Me: But why didn't he want you to work?

Aigul: ... [pause] Honestly, I can't explain, when I worked in distribution of films office, he used to be jealous about all our male customers. When I found another job he was not satisfied by that I used to come home later than he did. Thus, he always did not like something in my jobs.

Aigul's career was dependent upon her husband after she got married. She did not accuse him of not allowing her to work but emphasized several times that it was him who did not want her to work. Aigul was telling her story in a positive manner. She did not seem to be very

disappointed that could not work properly so far, but mentioned that her husband's relatives start their own business and she planned to work there as it would be fine for both her child and her husband.

Aigul's husband was almost 30 years old when he bride-kidnapped her, whereas Aigul was 11 years younger than he. The age difference could also influence Aigul's obedience to her husband and her passivity to resist him. However, it is necessary to highlight here, that this factor could be just one out of many that require women's obedience to their husbands as they become dependent on their husbands and their families after marriage. Even in the families where the age difference between the spouses is not significant, women are supposed to obey their husbands and their families. I discuss this tendency in the next chapter in detail.

### ***3.2 The Vision of Ideal Marriage or Attitudes towards the Act of Bride-kidnapping***

Some of the interviewees did not give any answer to the question of how they saw their ideal marriage. These were the women who did not tell much about their bride-kidnapping experience and were interviewed in the presence of their mothers. However they expressed their attitude toward the act of bride-kidnapping in their answers. Those women who did share what they imagined about an ideal marriage were interviewed in more private atmosphere, i.e. separately from their mothers. As a result, Aigul said that everyone dreams about the marriage in a "normal way" where the process of bride-kidnapping does not occur. Her words made me to think that she found the act of bride-kidnapping something abnormal or something that is inevitably imposed on women of the South Kazakhstan region. As Aigul explained further:

I dreamt about a normal wedding... I was deprived of many things. I didn't have the actual wedding ceremony with wedding dress and party. I got pregnant soon and it was too late to make a celebration. My husband used to make jokes of how

he could bring a white dress for me and we could have a ride in the city as if it was our wedding day. [serious expression]...As for my daughter, I hope she will have all these or be bride-kidnapped, what is more important is her happiness, be it bride-kidnapping or standard wedding ceremony.

Aigul stated that bride-kidnapping can be viewed as an alternative way of getting married as it does not involve substantial financial expenses and may be a very comfortable way of getting married for those who have financial problems. Her ambiguous, at the first sight, attitude towards bride-kidnapping confused me when I was listening to her answer. She talked with a sense of despair when she described all those things 'she was deprived of' being bride-kidnap, but then added that she would not mind if her daughter was bride-kidnapped. All she worried about was her daughter's happiness. Interestingly, I got the same answer from many mothers of bride-kidnapped women, when asked them about their feelings about their daughters' bride-kidnapping. Most of the mothers said that they felt fine and what was important for them at that moment was their daughters' happiness. The concept of "happiness" for the Kazakh woman is related to her status of a married woman. To get married is more important for a woman rather than to stay an old maid. Thus, women and especially elderly women wish their daughters happiness via marriage. Bride-kidnapping is one of the easy ways to get that "happiness".

Despite all the disturbing elements of bride-kidnapping some women approve of it and even wish it for their daughters. Indira's mother, for example, described her whole family during the interview and mentioned that she had two more daughters. Those daughters had reached marriage age and had even "overstepped" it already. They graduated from university the year previously and now she dreamt about their marriage. "I would be hilariously happy to hear one day that they were bride-kidnapped. [laughing]... Moreover, when the girls are late from work, I hope that they are late because they are bride-kidnapped [laughing]". The position of Indira's mother is understandable because a woman after twenty is considered old for marriage in

Kazakhstan. Therefore, women try to get married while they still study at the university or college. Those women who do not study also try to get married before they are twenty. Therefore, the act of bride-kidnapping usually happens with young women, unsurprisingly.

Stepping back to bride-kidnapped women's lives before the act of bride-kidnapping, I intend to analyse another part of their experience that concerns their boyfriends or beloved men they had at the moment the act of bride-kidnapping occurred. The only woman who was bride-kidnapped by her boyfriend was Indira. She knew her husband and was in a relationship with him. Other interviewees did not know their husbands for a long time and were not in relationships with them, i.e. did not think about them as their boyfriends.

Aigerim, for example, said that she had a boyfriend whom she really loved and planned to marry before this act. When I asked Aigerim why she did not marry her boyfriend who she loved and knew quite long, she replied: "My boyfriend was 22 at that time but my ex-husband was 25 and I thought that it was better to marry an older guy who knew what he wanted and was ready to marry. As for my boyfriend, he was actually too young for marriage and involved in his career in another city. Who knew when he would come, I couldn't wait for ages, you know, how it happens among us, Kazakhs." Hence, from what Aigerim said she was in a relationship but stayed in the family of a bride-kidnapper as she thought him being more ready for marriage. She was 21 and was studying her last year at the university when all these events happened. As I mentioned before, girls in South Kazakhstan region usually get married before they are 20. After this age limit, it is quite hard to get married for a woman. She could not hope and wait for her boyfriend's proposal and was in a hurry to marry.

Aigerim also told me that it was not the first act of bride-kidnapping in her life, as she had been bride-kidnapped twice before, when she was younger. The attempted bride-kidnappings



were not successful. She was able to escape both times from the bride-kidnappers by inventing some excuses before she could have been brought to the house of bride-kidnappers. Aigerim stated that she did not feel anything and hardly knew them. The third time she was bride-kidnapped “consensually” by her future husband. When she was bride-kidnapped by her future husband, she did not feel anything to him either. Moreover, she had her own boyfriend. But that time Aigerim decided “a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush”<sup>2</sup>. The status of a married woman is very important in the Kazakh society, thus, women and their families get worried if a woman does not get married in an “appropriate time”. Women usually stop “choosing” their future partners when their age limit exceeds the “normal”. At the point when Aigerim began telling about the plans she had she added the following: “I planned to apply for MA and have a work, but I was so stupid that I married him; I would have better been off to stay with my family, finished my study and found a work”. It was evident that her marriage was far from a “love marriage”. She regretted about her decision afterwards, but she did it because was not sure about her actual boyfriend who lived in another city at that time and was not ready to take the responsibility of a marriage.

Aigul also had a boyfriend when she was bride-kidnapped by her husband. Moreover, she learned later that her boyfriend also intended to bride-kidnap her at the same day her husband did. Her husband was “more successful” as Aigul explained. But during our further discussion she said that there was a significant difference between her boyfriend and her husband. Her boyfriend was much younger; he was just 21 and did not have a stable work. Her husband in contrast was more reliable as by his 30 he had a good job and good support the family. There was one more point that Aigul pointed out that was the fact that her husband did not have

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<sup>2</sup> It is popular saying used to explain people’s position when they have two or more options and choose only one which seems to be more feasible.

parents. They had died long ago and he lived with his sister and other relatives. She expected to get to the family where she would not depend on the husband's parents and be independent to some extent. From the comparison presented by Aigul, it felt that she based her decision on her future benefit, the benefit of a good family. She did not say a word about her feelings and never mentioned anything that could be referred to "love marriage". Interestingly, none of the interviewees said about the role of love in their marriages except for Indira who mentioned that she got love in her new family. She used love in a different sense though, indicating love and care of her husband's family. Thus, love did not seem to be viewed or valued as an important part of the marriage.

Marzhan did not have a boyfriend but had a person she was in love with. She said that it was her dream, she loved everything in him. That man did not know anything about Marzhan's feelings. When I asked her why she did not tell him anything or try to become closer she reacted with the phrase: "No, it was just a dream, no, no, I just admired him, and he was so cute [laughing]". She did not tell anything to the man she loved about her feelings but married her husband instead. When she described her husband she did it with scorn and was wondering all the time how she finally decided to marry him and stay after she was bride-kidnapped. As she shared further:

Marzhan: I don't know really why I stayed there. Well, maybe because of my mother... [pause] My mother was in a very difficult situation, she did not have a job and I couldn't help her at all... [after a while].... I want to tell you something, but please take it seriously, ok? I also think that I left there because he bewitched me. I found out about it recently, when I went to one old lady to tell my fortunes. She told me that he did it because wanted me to stay with him.... And that's why I could not resist and leave him, instead I gave birth to three children in ten years....it's insane, how did it happen? He wanted more children and of course now I won't find anyone divorced and with three children. Probably it was his intention.

Marzhan saw the reason of her staying in the family of a bride-kidnapper in something that was intangible. She did not finish her thought about her mother's difficult position at the moment of her bride-kidnapping but shifted to the one she saw more appropriate. Marzhan said that she addressed to a "fortune teller" when encountered problems with her husband. Thus, she presented what the fortune teller predicted her and explained her problems by the intangible power that caused those problems between her and her husband. However, she also said that always had the problems and conflicts with him as never loved her husband.

It was not only Marzhan who talked about the power of the beyond. Aigerim for example, told me how she worried about her future and the future of her child after divorce. I first assumed that she referred to the social insecurity she was in as she didn't have job and place to live of her own. But then she said that she thought about the danger her husband's family might cause to her and her child. "I am very afraid of their further actions; I left my pictures there, who knows what they might do with them. .... [Me: What could possibly happen with your pictures and how can they cause you any danger, you far from there?]. . . Well, don't you know how it always happens, they might apply to a witch who would cause me some illness or whatever else they would ask her to do." Aigerim did not feel safe because of the danger the family of her husband's family and husband himself could cause to her and her child. In both cases, Marzhan and Aigerim connect their problems with something that is beyond. Their explanations reflect the way they see the problems. This way limits women from any determinate actions in deciding their problems as the root of the problems is not tangible.

Another interviewed woman, Maya, said that also had a boyfriend when she was bride-kidnapped all of a sudden. Unfortunately, I could not learn more details about their relationships

and why she agreed to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper. She just said that she had other plans for her life as well as her own boyfriend but it all remained in the past.

When I look back at the cases of bride-kidnapping I encountered during my interviews, I find it impossible to draw the border and differentiate them in terms of consensual and non-consensual bride-kidnapping. Some women knew that they would be bride-kidnapped for others it was an absolute unexpectedness. However, even those women who knew that it would happen with them were influenced by some other factors, for example, age factor, that is relevant in the discourse of marriage. The difference between consensual and non-consensual bride-kidnapping is not strictly defined and the border between two is blurred. There are many other factors that would be discussed in the subsequent chapters that have an influence on women's decision to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper or "wish" to be bride-kidnapped.

## **Chapter 4 - Roles of Kinship Relations in Arranging Marriages**

*“Man makes the traditions, woman passes them on” (Lubin 1981, 182).*

In this chapter, I shed light on the relationships between children and their parents before and after marriage. These relationships explain the respect children demonstrate to their parents and elderly relatives. The different roles are assigned to women and men within this system. This chapter comprises two subchapters which tackle the role of kinship relationship in arranging marriages and family as an essential cell of the societal body. I emphasize the role of children’s life-long dependency on their parents as one of the influential factors in the arrangement of their personal lives. Thus, in the discourse of bride-kidnapping, the couples, particularly women do not always have a choice in the “construction” of their marriages. I demonstrate how and at what point women’s lives and their positions in the families change before and after they get married. There is special focus on the women’s status she gets after she gets married and gives a birth to a male child. I try to explain what role is assigned to a married woman in the patrilineal kinship system of Kazakhstan and how it reflects on the act of bride-kidnapping.

### ***4.1 Children/ Parents Relationships before and after Marriage***

Reuel R. Hanks (2005) in discussing Central Asian societies, highlights the importance of kinship relationships in the lives of Kazakhs along with other people of Central Asia. According to Hanks, these kinship ties based on marriages and blood relationships serve as “a network of social and financial support” (Hanks 2005, 235). He explains how strong and significant the role of kinship assistance among the relatives is. Hanks emphasizes the status of marriage as one of

the tools to reinforce the significance of the family in the Kazakh lives and extend kinship ties (2005, 236). Cheng also discusses kinship ties of Kazakhs as a key element in the construction of the family; “as a result of the ties of marriage and kinship, a Kazakh man can always count on having the support of his relatives. He knows he can draw on the resources and the network of his relatives in times of need” (Cheng 2001, 65). Since marriage, as such, is considered an integral part in the construction of the Kazakh families, I intend to analyse the role of kinship ties built on marital and blood relationships within the discourse of bride-kidnapping.

As it was mentioned earlier, the role of kinship is very important in the lives of the Kazakh society. The younger generations obey the older ones throughout their whole lives. Thus, the older members of the families take a special position in the hierarchy of the family structure. This phenomenon also explains the children-parents life-long dependency. This dependency is manifested differently for Kazakh men and women. Men are not supposed to leave the home of their parents; they stay with their own families and inherit everything afterwards. When there are two or more sons in the family, the youngest one usually stays with the parents and others move to separate places. These places are usually situated not far from the house of their parents or even on the same territory where the parent’s house is. Thus, it is women’s duty to leave the family of her own to join their husbands’ ones. There are other options depending on the circumstances of particular cases, but the common scenario looks as the one presented above. As a result, children and parents stay dependent on each other during their whole lives. Children are nurtured to become the future support for the parents (Poliakov 1992, 53). This life-long dependency of children on their parents, however, limits children’s capacity to make independent decisions and their “freedom of choice”. Even after they emerge from their adolescence and

enter “adult” life, they are still influenced and dependent on their parents’ opinion and decisions. It is vividly reflected in one of the most important events of children’s lives, i.e. marriage.

Marriages arranged by parents have been a common phenomenon for the Kazakhs since the earliest times. Hanks claims that the marriages had traditionally been arranged before the couple reached adolescence (Hanks 2005, 236). The contemporary situation in the discourse of marriage may be different nowadays, but the Kazakh people attempt to follow what they perceive as the old pattern of marriage, which considerably changed throughout the history.

Despite that contemporary marriage involves contributions and efforts from all of its participants, i.e. groom, bride and the relatives of both sides, it remains a union that depends much on the couple’s parents. This dependency is explained by the kinship ties that are very important for Kazakhs. Parents play significant roles in the lives of their children both before and after they get married. How different those roles for male and female children within the patrilineal families are, I analyse in the following chapter.

To demonstrate the role of kinship ties and life-long dependency between children and parents in the framework of bride-kidnapping, I will present an analysis of my interviewees’ narrated life experiences. By incorporating these stories, I determine to what extent kinship relationships may influence the practice of bride-kidnapping. What is important, too, is to determine who the main actors in these relationships are.

The first story is about the bride-kidnapping experience of Aigerim and her mother Sholpan<sup>3</sup>. According to them, at the time of their grandparents, the practice of bride-kidnapping was a union between the families of the couple rather than between the young people themselves. Those marriages were completely arranged by the parents, where the bride did not have any actual choice. The contemporary status of the bride changed to some extent since the pre-Soviet

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<sup>3</sup> For additional information, see the section “Introduction to the interviewees’ life stories”

and Soviet time. According to the interviewees, this change appeared in the late post-Soviet time. By telling how the practice of bride-kidnapping manifests itself nowadays, Sholpan said that the consent of a woman is one of the components of bride-kidnapping ritual. By consent of a woman she meant the event that happens after the act of bride-kidnapping. During this event, some members of the bride-kidnapped woman's family come to see her in the family of the bride-kidnapper. They come to see her and ask if she "wants" to stay in the new family. This is the moment when she gets a "choice" to return. However, when I asked Aigerim and Sholpan about the frequency of bride-women's return, they could hardly remember any cases. The most interesting part was the reason why women would most probably agree to go back to their families. It happens usually not because of a woman's wish but the wish of her parents. If the parents do not consider the groom be an appropriate couple for their daughter, they are more inclined to return her back.

Thus, the authority of parents in the act of bride-kidnapping is very influential. However, I do not exclude the cases when women experience the act of bride-kidnapping "willingly" or against their parents' wish. But this fact does not prevent women's further dependency on parents; it simply transfers this dependency to her husband and his family. Before women get married, they are completely dependant on their parents in terms of their education and "career." Their future marital life is very often determined by their parents as well, as they are those who define the appropriate future husband for their daughters.

After getting married, women become dependent on the husbands and the families of their spouses. This dependency manifests itself in the power of the husband and his family to make major decisions in the life of a woman, for example, in terms of her education and career. Poliakov characterizing married women of Central Asia states that "the standards of behavior for



married women are best defined by the postulate that ‘a good woman is silent and never leaves home without her husband’” (Poliakov 1992, 83). A set of behavior that married women are expected to follow includes many traditional components like wearing traditional clothes, rituals that express women’s respect to the elderly relatives and obedience to the husband and his parents<sup>4</sup>, especially to mothers-in-law. Thus, the success of the couple’s family depends on the relationship between the bride and her husband’s mother much. “If the two women like one another, then the home will be peaceful” (Poliakov 1992, 54). One of the explanations of this phenomenon is men’s dependency on his parents’ opinion. The following example provides an insight into this dependency.

Aigerim had an unpleasant bride-kidnapping experience but still shared much information and details of her personal life. She was “voluntary” bride-kidnapped, i.e. she knew beforehand about the act of bride-kidnapping. She lived in the city before the marriage but had to move to her husband’s house that was in *aul*<sup>5</sup>. According to Aigerim, her marriage was mostly dependent on her mother-in-law, whose actions, as a result, became a determinate factor in her “divorce”. As she explains further:

My marriage was not successful, unfortunately. My mother-in-law was one of the main obstacles in the success of my marriage. She could not accept that Murat married me, not the girl she found for him. From the very beginning, she refused to pay for my last year of education, so that my parents had to do that. I did everything I was supposed to do, like all those traditional duties women have to do. I kept the household and tried to get used to the new environment. However, my husband’s attitude towards me was changing under the influence of his mother. We had a lot of quarrels that were happening because of his mother. Our relationship did not change even after I got pregnant, got even worse, when they knew I was expecting a girl. They (my husband and his

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<sup>4</sup> However, this set of behavior changed, according to the interviewees’ opinions. All of them noticed that women nowadays are expected to wear kerchief only first weeks after they get married and when they have guests in their houses. The daily traditional rituals like serving tea to the husband and his parents or household duties became less strict, but still take place especially in the families living in rural areas. The respect and obedience to the parents did not change though. The husbands’ parents still stay the main body of the family with their status of authority.

<sup>5</sup> *Aul* is the place that refers to the rural area, similar to the meaning of village.

mother) tried to turn me out of the house several times, but I did not panic and expected some change, that never happened.

Aigerim continued to live with her husband's family until she learned about a threat to her pregnancy that made her go back to the city and consult a doctor. After she gave birth to her daughter, her husband and his family made her leave their house reproaching her for having a female child. Having experienced difficult times that reflected on the poor health of Aigerim and her daughter, the decision to leave the husband's family was the hardest in her life. However, this decision was not conditioned by her warm feelings to her husband, as Aigerim confessed herself, but were a result of the stigma and difficulties she was afraid to face in making such a decision. As all bride-kidnapped women and their families acknowledged, it is almost unacceptable for a woman to leave the groom's family when the act of bride-kidnapping occur. The woman is considered "not a virgin" anymore and gets the status of a "dirty woman" if she returns. Bride-kidnapped women and their parents are aware of such consequences and try to accept bride-kidnapping even if it is against one of the parties' will.

After separating from her husband, Aigerim decided to live separately from her parents with her child alone. However, her parents did not give her permission to do that expressing their care and concern about their daughter. This fact became of special interest to me as it implied the idea that a woman did not live independently even after she had the experience of being a married woman. As soon as she left the family of her husband, she immediately belonged to her natal family again. Social insecurity, i.e. insufficient level of education or work experience<sup>6</sup> did not allow Aigerim to start her independent living without the interference of both her ex-husband and her family.

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<sup>6</sup> The lack of education and work experience for most of my interviewees who were bride-kidnapped was discussed in the third chapter as one of the consequences of their marriage.

The dependency of a man on his family is significant as well. Aigerim's story displayed how dependent her husband was on his mother since his attitude towards Aigerim also varied under the influence of her mother-in-law. Before they got married, he was very attentive to her and did much to prove his love to Aigerim. She did not reciprocate his affection, however agreed to the act of bride-kidnapping at last. Aigerim also said that his care and "love" made her to agree. After Aigerim's bride-kidnapping, her husband was happy and treated her as good as before the act. However, according to Aigerim, his attitude changed after a while under the influence of his mother. He became rude and indifferent to his wife. This and negative attitude of Aigerim's mother-in-law towards her led to their divorce, which was difficult to call an official one, as they had not registered with the state after their "traditional marriage". To the question about the reason of why they did not get married officially, Aigerim replied, "When I asked him about our official marriage registration, he told me to ask his mother. My mother-in-law did not allow us to make it official, as a result". The act of bride-kidnapping presupposes stealing a woman whereas the official ceremony and official registration of a marriage can happen much later or does not happen at all as in Aigerim's case. The fact that they were not married officially allowed Aigerim's husband and his family to make her leave any time they had problems or quarrels. Thus, Aigerim's story shows how serious decisions concerning an official marriage were mostly dependent not on the husband but on his mother. This example underpins the argument of children's life-long dependency on their parents, which very often results in shifting children's responsibility and decision making to their parents.

## **4.2 The “High status” of Elderly Women within the Rules of Patrilineal Descent**

Poliakov, discussing Central Asian family structures, explains that “the active search for a bride is undertaken by the mother, or, if she is not alive, by one of the closest female relatives, who must be elderly... The mother or the female relative who chooses the bride is in no way influenced by the tastes and desires of the young man, on the principle that ‘your elders know best what has to be done’.” (Poliakov 1992, 53) This general principle of choosing a bride and arranging a man’s wedding by the groom’s mother is characteristic for all Central Asian societies according to Poliakov. To understand the role of an elderly woman and the role she occupies in bride-kidnapping along with other actors involved in this act, it is necessary to examine the kinship structure within which these processes occur.

The kinship structure of the Kazakhs follows the rules of patrilineal descent. The general definition of such systems is explained when relatives are linked through males only and “females are part of their father’s line, but their children descent from the husbands” (Spradley and McCurdy 2003, 213). To understand how this structure is formed and mechanism of its functioning within the context of Kazakh family, I introduce Margery Wolf’s (2003 [1972]) analysis of this pattern of patrilineal kinship system based on the example of Chinese families in Taiwan. I cite the Chinese system because it is similar to the Kazakh patrilineal one. This analysis is intended to help understand the role of women within patrilineal families.

Women in Kazakhstan as well as in China are considered “temporary members” of their fathers’ households. Similarly to what I have already discussed before, a man in Chinese families is born into his family and a member through his whole life, whereas a woman is separated from the family, where she was born, after she gets married to a family that is of her future husband.

Wolf in her article states that the unmarried woman's status of a temporary and irrelevant member in her "father's family affects her attitude toward it" (Wolf 2003, 242). She does not feel necessity or importance in maintaining its continuity as she will belong to another one later. When a woman gets married, her "official ties" with her father are split, whereas the ones with mother remain the most lasting. The same happens with Kazakh families, young women separate from the official ties with fathers after they get married but not with mothers. This is also manifested in the interviews with bride-kidnapped women. Even the interviews were conducted only with their mothers as the family representatives. Despite that women do not belong to their natal families after they get married, they still keep close ties with their mothers.

After the wedding ceremony, the women move to the family of her husband where other members of that family usually refuse to accept them. This is the unit where they are expected to contribute to its continuity though. This contribution is a long lasting process that starts with giving birth to a male child and bringing him up to the status of a married man. Afterward, she still continues to work on supporting that unit when her son's bride enters their family. At this stage, her status changes. To understand it better in the context of Kazakh families, I refer back to my interviewees below.

After conducting all the interviews, I found that the role of a mother-in-law or an elderly woman was very significant in all interviewees' families. The elder woman occupies a significant place in the family and makes most of the major decisions concerning the future of the children.

In this regard, I would like to present another interview that describes Almira's experience of bride-kidnapping. Almira, highlighted the role of her mother-in-law in the decision to stay in the family of her bride-kidnapper. She did not know the kidnapper and said that the act

if bride-kidnapping occurred in a violent way. Almira met her friend's neighbor in the street who asked her to have a walk with him. She did not remember anything else as she lost her consciousness afterwards. Almira remembered only how she woke up the next day in a new house surrounded by unknown people. The first person, who was the most persistent in persuading her to stay in the new family, was the groom's mother. There were also around ten old ladies who did not allow her to leave. Almira's mother was not in the city on the day of her bride-kidnapping. Almira admitted that it was an influential factor in her decision not to leave the groom's family. She added, "I did not have anyone to consult with. My mother was in another city. If she were with me, I would most probably have made the right decision." Interestingly, Almira made her decision based on her mother-in-law's persuasion once she knew there was no hope for her own mother.

Almira's mother-in-law died 20 days after the act of bride-kidnapping and she stayed in the groom's family. Almira learned later that her mother-in-law was ill and had insisted on her son's marriage in spite of his early age<sup>7</sup>. The quickest and most appropriate way of doing it, they found in kidnapping any girl he liked. The bride-kidnapper did not know Almira but saw her several times as she was a neighbor of his friend. After this act, the groom's mother did her best to persuade the bride to stay promising Almira and her relatives that she would be a mother to Almira and she would never regret her decision. However, after her death, Almira's life became even more unbearable as she was accused by her husband and his elder sister in the death of their mother. This pressure and constant scandals in the new family led her to escape after six months of living together with her husband.

All six interviewees and their mothers highlighted that the role of mothers-in-law was very significant during the act of bride-kidnapping and afterwards. It is usually the mother of a

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<sup>7</sup> Almira's husband, Askar was 18 when he got married. Almira was 16 at that time.

groom who organizes everything for the arrival of her future daughter-in-law and she is the one whose task is to persuade a bride to stay. Aigerim, for example, described a story similar to Almira's, where the mother of her prospective groom again played a determinate role in the bride's decision to stay with the groom's family:

I assisted in the bride-kidnapping of my sister-in-law for my brother. She was my friend and I helped him to kidnap her. She was hysterically furious at my act, crying, shouting and expressing how much she hated me. No one could talk to her; she did not want to listen to us. [She was] throwing everything that came into her hands. But then, my mother came up to her and said how much our family liked her. It took her a while to think it over before she agreed to stay in our family. I remember how she added in her final decision that she stayed out of respect to my mom.

Most of the stories show that women of elderly age, i.e. those who are the oldest in the families, occupy a privileged position in the hierarchal structure of the family. I would like to incorporate another story of Indira and her mother Bibigul, where I also noticed this tendency. Indira encountered problems with her own parents during the act of bride-kidnapping. She said that that it was a fairly "voluntary" act: she knew her husband-to-be and was ready to stay with his family. However, her own mother was strongly against her daughter's decision. Bibigul told in detail how she remembered the day of her daughter's bride-kidnapping. As Bibigul explained further:

I went to the groom's family with my son to talk to Indira right after I knew about her bride-kidnapping. We tried to make her go back, even forcefully but she was persistent and stayed in the family of the bride-kidnapper. All members of our family were very upset about Indira's marriage, and we did not want to accept the groom and his family. She was too young, and we had so many perspectives about her future life. Then, we invited Indira's grandmother, i.e. my mother-in-law from the village to find a solution to the problem. We cried the whole night, we didn't know what to do, but early in the morning, my mother-in-law decided that we had to meet guests (relatives of the groom) and agree to that marriage, and we did what she said.

Interestingly, the opinion of the elder woman is very significant in the family as she has the status of a person who makes the decisions for the younger generation. Her decision is accepted with respect by all members of the family. As a result, the women, who go through the act of bride-kidnapping and accompanying disturbing procedures this practice entails, participate in arranging those practices and thereby reinforce them. This happens when those women get the status of an elderly and respected mother of the house.

The position of a man also varies in the family in different periods of his life. Once he gets married, he starts building his ties through his son. This is the moment when a woman contributes to those ties significantly. Women are expected to support what is needed for a continuity of a man's kinship. Once she accomplishes this responsibility, she continues to strengthen those ties. Arranging bride-kidnapping for her son and being the family's elderly woman is one of her responsibilities that the patrilineal system determines for her.

The system positions the elderly women to deal with "internal" affairs of the family such as running the chores in the house, raising children, etc. Men, however, deal with "external affairs" such as building and maintaining the house, ensuring financial security, etc. In the discourse of bride-kidnapping, women deal with the organizational aspect of this practice since it is an internal affair. Men deal only with the financial aspect of bride-kidnapping since it is an external affair. Thus, men do not need to deal with the organization of bride-kidnapping. It is the women's responsibility in maintaining this patrilineal system. This is the reason why women are the ones who reinforce this practice.

The patrilineal system in Kazakhstan respects age additionally. Apart from having the gender roles that are described above, it emphasizes the age as a factor to subdivide these roles.



As a result, older people are revered. This reverence gives them the right to deal with issues of younger ones, for example, their children.

Children's life-long dependency is evident and parents are often those who get to define what the future of their child will be. Parents usually make the major decisions in the lives of their children, i.e. what to study, where to live, whom to marry. The women are more often subjected to this dependency as the women's status in the Kazakh pattern of thinking does not presuppose women's independency and autonomy. Nonetheless, in the patrilineal kinship system, elderly women of the family take a special position. This position is assigned to a woman as her contribution to the continuity of men's ties. Her active participation and responsibility in bride-kidnapping is one of the methods to prove her loyalty to this system. The patrilineal kinship system is very important in the discourse of bride-kidnapping and marriage, in general. The presented pattern of patrilineal system is patriarchal in fact. The authority in the family is typical for males and especially older males. This kinship pattern sustains the practice of bride-kidnapping as it allows its main actors to contribute to their kinship ties via bride-kidnapping.

By viewing bride-kidnapping within the discourse of family and kinship relations I touched upon the area which is referred to the private sphere. To further the analysis of bride-kidnapping, I would examine how the ritual is positioned within the public sphere, i.e. within the law and state frameworks. It is also important to view the political changes of the public sphere that influenced the practice of bride-kidnapping from the pre-Soviet time to modernity.

## Chapter 5 - The position of Bride-kidnapping within the Framework of Politics and State Power

*Marriage is something more than a civil contract subject to regulation by the state; it is a fundamental right of free men. (Schwelb 1963, 337)*

In this chapter I present an overview of practicing the act of bride-kidnapping before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal how this practice evolved throughout the history, what changes it underwent and how it reflected on women, i.e. on those who were direct subjects of that practice. By presenting this wider context of social states' transformation to the independent societies, I explore how those changes on the societal and political level influenced the development of bride-kidnapping in Kazakhstan.

I seek to understand and determine the role of the state in the discourse of bride-kidnapping. By doing so, I present the state's position in relation to the act of bride-kidnapping. The questions that are of my concern in the present chapter can be formulated as following. How is the practice of bride-kidnapping viewed by the people and where do they locate it? What is the role of traditionalism discourse in relation to the practice of bride-kidnapping? How do people see the change that practice underwent? What place does this practice occupy in the lives of Kazakhs? These questions and analysis presented in this chapter intend to clarify what can be hidden behind the practice of bride-kidnapping and what this practice means for people.

To further with the discussion of the state involvement and changes in the practice of bride-kidnapping, throughout the process of transformation from the socialist to independent states, I would like first to go back and remind how this process is presented in relation to the practice of bride-kidnapping in the works of scholars who discuss and study it.

Some of the authors (Akiner, Poliakov, Corcoran-Nantes), discussing the process of political transformation that collapse of the Soviet Union brought, refer to all countries of Central Asia. They outline the changes and processes that were peculiar for all Central Asian states. Shirin Akiner (1997), for example, discussing Central Asian states during pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods, highlighted the life style of those societies that had much in common. She pointed out that all Central Asian societies underwent “an intensive process of modernity” (Shirin 1997, 261) under Soviet rule. She claims that traditional culture and practices peculiar to it were “either destroyed or rendered invisible” (Shirin 1997, 261).

Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes (2005) also outlines the changes peculiar to all post-Soviet Central Asian societies. Among those changes she underscores the reemergence of the traditional practices after the collapse of the Soviet Union that were forbidden and limited during the Soviet time. She refers bride-kidnapping and other marital practices to the list of the “traditional practices” that were restricted in the Soviet time.

Other authors orient their studies specifically to a particular country of Central Asia and examine thoroughly the situation of political change after the acquisition of independence. For example, Martha Brill Olcott, giving a historical overview of Kazakhs’ lives, outlines a special civil code that was introduced during the Soviet time in Kazakhstan and “provided sentences of 40 days to one year at hard labor for the payment of kalym, forced marriage, polygamy or forced marriage” (Olcott 1995, 172). This law assisted in restriction of those traditional practices that contradicted the Soviet ideology which was oriented on the construction of modern societies. Cynthia Werner (2004) examines the practice of bride-kidnapping in the context of Kazakhstan and gives a detailed review of other authors’ works related to these issues. For example, discussing the works of Massell, Werner illustrates that the Soviet state introduced “radical

social policies based on Marxist ideology.... the Bolshevik law tried to widen the path of Kazakh girls by passing laws that outlawed patriarchal marriage practices” (Werner 2004, 63). Thus, she shows how the traditional practices like bride-kidnapping were restricted in the Soviet period but she also adds that they reemerged again after its collapse.

Most of the works discussed above and in the previous chapters approach the issue of bride-kidnapping mainly through the change which the transition to democratization of post-Soviet countries entailed. The process of democratization that was primarily oriented towards ‘freedom’ was said to have been absent under the socialist regime. There were political changes that were supposed to sustain and increase women’s political involvement in the societal life. However, the process of political transformation from the socialist state to the independent one brought economical hardships, sense of helplessness and unemployment to Central Asian women. (Werner 2004, 65)

The resurgence of bride-kidnapping practice in the post-socialist Kazakh society is related to the change occurred as the result of political transformation in the post-Soviet states. Werner (2004, 63), for example, outlines that the process of transformation from the socialist state to independent one entailed the changes that led to the construction of unifying national identities and resurgence of old traditions and customs which became part of new state policies. Hence, I found it relevant to study how different the practice of bride-kidnapping was during the Soviet time from the one that is practised nowadays.

To learn more about the frequency of bride-kidnapping practice nowadays, I asked the interviewees’ opinion about practicing of bride-kidnapping before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As it turned out, the present practice is widespread in the society and accepted as a tradition, which is taken as a normal phenomenon. All the interviewees referred to bride-

kidnapping as a part of the old tradition that was inherited from the ancestors and remains a part of the Kazakh culture. When the interviewees were asked about the frequency of this act, they all had a similar opinion that it was a very common practice in Kazakh society<sup>8</sup> and was taken for granted. This practice seems to be anchored in the Kazakh society as something that requires respect as traditions are nurtured and cherished by all its members.

The interviewees, reflecting on the changes this practice underwent throughout history, acknowledged that this “tradition” manifested itself differently nowadays, as an adjustment to the modern world. All the interviewees agreed that the contemporary bride-kidnapping was simplified in the sense that it required fewer procedures and ceremonies. For example, Aigul telling her story of bride-kidnapping remembered that when her husband first brought her to his house after bride-kidnapping there were no relatives waiting for them. She said that one of the components of the old bride-kidnapping ritual was the presence of the groom’s relatives, who were waiting for the bride and making preparations for the ceremony. In her case, it was more simplified in a way that there were only members of the groom’s immediate family.

However, Aigul said that the mechanism of the events related to the act of bride-kidnapping remained unchangeable. Generally, the act of bride-kidnapping happens according to a similar scenario. A groom bride-kidnaps a bride and brings her to his house, i.e. to the house of his relatives. After that she is placed in a separate room with other female relatives of the groom. These relatives put a white kerchief on the bride as an indication of her agreement to stay. However, this procedure is often symbolic, as women make the bride to put on a kerchief even if she does not agree. The bride is supposed to write a letter of consent that indicates her “willing”

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<sup>8</sup> By Kazakh society I refer to the ethnic Kazakhs that lived on the territory of Kazakhstan.

agreement to stay in the family of the groom<sup>9</sup>. When the agreement is accepted, the grooms' relatives go to the relatives of the bride with the letter of consent from her to let them know about the act of bride-kidnapping. The relatives accept the guests if they are not against the marriage and go with them to visit their daughter and ask her opinion about that act. If the bride does not want to stay, she has a chance at that moment "to say her word" and return home with her parents. If she agrees, her parents leave her in the family of the bride-kidnapper.

Thus, those stories that were shared by my interviews had a similar order of events with some variations depending on a particular case. The letter of consent was present in all the stories of my interviewees though. It seems that the practice changed slightly throughout history but the main mechanism of procedures does not significantly vary from the one people used to have earlier.

In addition, the results of the research based on the interviews of bride-kidnapped women and their families showed that bride-kidnapping was actively practised during the Soviet time as well. All the interviewees agreed that bride-kidnapping was an inseparable part of Kazakh traditions during pre-socialist, socialist and post-socialist time. Thus, no matter how restricted this practice was by the state during the Soviet time, those people who lived then testified to its active practice.

This finding underpins Peggy Watson's claim in "Rethinking transition" (2000) where she compares the socialist and post-socialist regimes and suggests that social and sexual inequality resided in both the systems. Watson shows how communism and democracy are viewed as oppositional constructions "in terms of the presence –absence of freedom" (Watson 2000, 187) within the framework of 'postsocialist' politics in the West. Throughout her analysis,

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<sup>9</sup> The letter of consent is just a nominal indication of bride-kidnapped woman's will to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper. I discuss it in details later in the present chapter.

she shows that the main political change in the postcommunist era is “the verb ‘making visible’ that persistently recurs” (Watson 2000, 198) and where democracy is seen as “providing the transparency, the opportunity to ‘lift the curtain’” (Watson 2000, 199). Democracy is constructed as “entailing ‘freedom of expression’ where once there was none. (Watson 2000, 199) She emphasizes that the discourse that is articulated nowadays around the acquisition of independence is oriented around freedom, that was said to be absent in the Soviet time.

Watson’s analysis demonstrates how women’s exclusion from the public realm was a long-established tendency which was hidden at some periods of time and thus, the practices that restricted women from their active participation in public life, for example bride-kidnapping, were not always evident. The practices that contributed to women’s exclusion from the public life were restricted officially by the state but not eradicated in fact. They remained to be practised by people but in a hidden form. This analysis of my interviewees’ stories show that the practice of bride-kidnapping was practised during the Soviet time, before it and after its collapse. Thus, the change that was the result of transformation from the socialist state to the independent one did not affect the practice of bride-kidnapping, as both systems were male dominated and women’s oppression was relevant to both.

The outcome of the research also showed that the practice of bride-kidnapping was not a practice of particular periods of time in the history of the Kazakh society. It was part of the peoples of Kazakhstan throughout all the periods in its different manifestations. Thus, the present situation of sexual and social inequality, where “women’s issues” (such as bride kidnapping) are not considered, cannot be the consequence of the change from socialism. The reassessment of bride-kidnapping through the consideration of all disturbing elements it comprises may bring the real change and make the present situation of women more favorable for women’s inclusion and

participation in public life. The practice of bride-kidnapping prevents women's access to public life and limits their chances to become active actors of that sphere.

Women are usually bride-kidnapped at early ages, in some cases even before they finish high school. It deprives them from the opportunity to further their education and become professionals in a particular sphere. After being bride-kidnapped, a woman is supposed to give birth to children and devote herself to the family. Thus, her further efforts to realize herself professionally when her children get older fail again because of the lack of educational and professional experience. Moreover, her further career life depends on her husband's will mostly. This common pattern of a married woman is applied to the discourse of marriage in general. However, bride-kidnapping serves to reinforce the "traditional roles" assigned to the married women. It contains the procedures that do not usually leave space to "women's freedom of choice".

Interestingly, none of the interviewed bride-kidnapped women while telling about their plans before bride-kidnapping or perspectives for the future mentioned that wanted to find a good career after finishing her education. Some women wanted to get a good job but only after they faced reality of the life, for example, Aigerim who stayed financially insecure with her child alone after the divorce. Women's ultimate goals were to get higher education but no one thought about applying their education to something in the professional world. Achieving professional goals through career was not a part of their life plans. That fact that women do not see themselves working somewhere in high positions or in many cases working at any sphere of public life does not concern the discourse of bride-kidnapping only but the discourse of marriage in general. The patrilineal kinship system that was discussed in the previous chapter assigns women to the positions where they are viewed as mothers of the sons rather than active



participants of the professional world. The practice of bride-kidnapping, as I mentioned before, contributes to these assigned roles and make them norms. Thus, the practice of bride-kidnapping sustains “women’s oppression” within the wider framework of marriage.

### ***5.1 The Frequency of Bride-kidnapping in Contemporary Kazakh Society***

At the present time, according to all the interviewees, the act of bride-kidnapping is a very common practice for the Kazakh community. Referring back to the interviewees’ stories, it is interesting to learn that bride-kidnapping is considered an expected event in Kazakh women’s lives by both women’s families and women themselves. For example, Aigul’s mother, one of my interviewees, telling the story of her daughter’s bride-kidnapping, said that she expected it when her daughter did not come back home in time after work. Despite that her daughter was just 18 and recently finished high school, she said that it was her first guess that her daughter was bride-kidnapped. When I asked her whether she had tried to search for her daughter after she didn’t find her at the workplace, she replied, “No, I waited until the visit of the groom’s relatives. Where and how was I supposed to search for her?” That fact that her mother’s first thought was about bride-kidnapping seemed surprising to me. It seemed that the practice of bride-kidnapping was taken for granted and anticipated at any moment of their daughter’s “adult” life. People are not surprised about cases of women’s kidnapping as this phenomenon is accepted as a “norm” by the members of the Kazakh society.

Besides the commonality of this practice among ethnic Kazakhs, bride-kidnapping was adopted in South Kazakhstan to such an extent that it concerned other ethnic groups living in that region. Hence, this practice came to be practised by other ethnic groups too, for example, in the South Kazakhstan region among Uzbeks and Uighurs. It must be stressed that bride-kidnapping

was not part of those groups' culture and was not referred to or practised otherwise as a tradition in other regions besides South Kazakhstan.

The frequency of bride-kidnapping is very high nowadays, and this act becomes a public matter once a woman is bride-kidnapped. The news is spread very quickly, and there is no chance for a bride-kidnapped woman and her family to hide what happened. It is an event which becomes part of discussions and gossiping among the relatives of both sides, that of the bride-kidnapped woman and bride kidnapper himself.

Bibigul, the mother of Indira, for instance, shared that almost all of her relatives had been married in a similar way. As an example, she told the story of her own sister. Bibigul's sister was bride-kidnapped against her will - I would refer to it as "involuntary" bride-kidnapping - and tried to resist by all means. Bibigul remembered that her sister resisted at the beginning, trying to commit suicide after she was bride-kidnapped. The relatives of the bride-kidnapper persuaded her somehow to stay. She did not feel any better after some time of living together with her husband. It lasted quite long even after she gave birth to her first child she tried to express her protest by neglecting her own baby. It took her three years to get used to everything. Bibigul herself shared that she found it normal as most of the women behaved in a similar way after a bride-kidnapping, but they all accepted it at the end. She also added that her sister, after a long period of fights and struggles, accepted her "destiny". Her sister's life, according to the interviewee, changed for the better as "she has five children and lives happily now".

Thus, Bibigul, by telling the story of her sister, revealed her own attitude towards this practice and her understanding of it through her comments afterwards. She found all the disturbing moments in the life of her sister as compulsory components that women have to undergo to be happy. A bride-kidnapped woman, according to her, has to confront some

difficulties on her way to “happiness”. Women get their happiness with the status of a mother who gives birth to a male child and then becomes an elderly woman (or mother-in-law) in the family when her son gets married. As it was mentioned before, to become an elderly woman who has power and privileges in the family, a woman should pass the way from the daughter-in-law to mother-in-law. She gets her power once she has a son who gets married and brings his wife to the house. (Akiner 1997, 277)

It is important to notice at this point that the afore-mentioned story happened during the Soviet time, and according to Bibigul, the bride-kidnapped woman could not return and leave the family of the bride-kidnapper. Bibigul added that “If you got married to the guy, you have to stay in his family; there is no way you can come back”. Hence, it seemed difficult to return or resist the act of bride-kidnapping during the Soviet time according to the interviewee’s experience. The interviewees explained that fact by women’s unawareness of possible options for resistance. Despite the existence of the Soviet laws that restricted all marital traditional practices, women still did not see protection in the state or were afraid to apply for it. How changed their attitude towards legal involvement from the state after the collapse of the Soviet Union is discussed in the following subchapter.

## ***5.2 The Role of the State Policies and their Effectiveness in the Discourse of Contemporary Bride-kidnapping***

Interviewees refer to the process of democratization as one of the changes in the practice of bride-kidnapping. They believe that the act of bride-kidnapping became more restricted after independence in that people became more careful and aware of possible consequences. However, none of the interviews mentioned the discourse of nationalism or referred to bride-kidnapping as

a tradition that contributed to the reinforcement of their national identity. Instead, they described the changes the practice of bride-kidnapping underwent after collapse of the Soviet Union. Mariyam, Aigul's mother, was the one who told me that the practice had changed considerably after independence. According to her, this process brought more informational awareness to the public, which limits bride-kidnappers' actions and gives more space to "women's freedom of choice". She told me that women knew more about their rights from information they see on television. Whereas before, i.e. during the Soviet time, women did and knew nothing as they were informationally limited and isolated from the world that was informationally advanced such as America, England, etc. Many sources of information became accessible to women's knowledge with the independence. According to Mariyam, women also hear more about legal cases of bride-kidnapping that became possible after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the socialist regime, there was a fear to prosecute bride-kidnappers. Despite the laws and restrictions that existed at that time against all forms of traditional practices, people did not feel free to turn to the state for help.

Nowadays the state's legal involvement that prosecutes the bride-kidnappers' actions has changed from the Soviet time. The contemporary legislation of Kazakhstan does not restrict "the traditional marriage practices" in contrast to the Soviet time. The state does not officially prosecute bride-kidnapping as such. There is no law in the legislation of Kazakhstan that provides punishment for bride-kidnapping directly. The law that may restrict and be the basis of legal claim is the case of kidnapping. Despite a considerable number of cases of "non-consensual" bride-kidnapping, Kazakhstan's legislation does not create a particular or specific law for bride-kidnapping. (Werner 2004, 60)

It seems surprising that the contemporary legislation of Kazakhstan does not contain any amendments concerning prosecution of bride-kidnapping specifically except for general law against kidnapping. The difference between bride-kidnapping and kidnapping have already been mentioned in the methodological part. I consider the difference between these two crucial in the discourse of law as well. If we examine the practice of bride-kidnapping through a human rights framework, especially in respect of age at marriage and consent, we can see that the practice of bride-kidnapping contradicts all laws stated in the international conventions of Human Rights.

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, states that “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”, and that “Men and women of full age...are entitled to equal rights as to marriage...” (Jensen and Thornton 2003, 9) The United Nations' 1962 Convention on the ‘Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration and an Associated Recommendation’ asks member states “to establish a minimum age of marriage of no less than 15 years. The 1979 Convention on the ‘Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’, and the 1990 ‘African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child’ suggest a minimum age for marriage of 18 years, consistent with the definition of childhood articulated in the ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child’” (Jensen and Thornton 2003, 9). Thus, the practice of bride-kidnapping violates women’s rights in the wider framework of Human Rights. The practice of bride-kidnapping usually happens with young women who do not reach their full age for marriage. The early age of bride-kidnapped women is not usually an obstacle for an act of bride-kidnapping. It also does not always happen according to “the free and full consent” of a woman. My research showed that only two women out of 6 knew about the act of bride-kidnapping but still found the whole procedure very disturbing.

However, most of the interviewees noticed that bride-kidnappers became more aware of the consequences of bride-kidnapping due to the growth of legal cases concerning the acts of kidnapping nowadays. Whereas before, i.e. during the Soviet time, they did not hear anything about legal cases of bride-kidnapping or knew at all if those cases occurred, nowadays they heard frequently about cases of legal complaints concerning bride-kidnapping. Thus, the contemporary ritual of bride-kidnapping involves more secure procedures both from the groom and his family.

One such procedure, as I mentioned above, is the written consent which is taken from the bride-kidnapped woman and taken by the relatives of the groom to the family of the bride. This letter is an indication of her “free will” to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper. When the relatives of the bride-kidnapper come to the parents of the bride, they must have a letter of consent written by the bride-kidnapped woman. However, as Aigul, one of the interviewees, claims, this letter does not mean anything as women are usually made to write them. It happens by verbal persuasion or in some cases women are forced to write them in case they disagree. This letter is both a symbolic and non-symbolic guarantee of bride-kidnapped woman’s “voluntary” staying. “The letter of consent” can hardly be taken as an indication of bride-kidnapped women’s “free will”. However, it saves the groom and his family from being sued by the bride’s family. These secure measures were implemented, according to Mariyam, the mother of Aigul, quite recently when several legal cases of bride-kidnapping were prosecuted.

What follows from the description of the daughter and her mother is that if the groom and his family decide to kidnap a woman there is a rare chance that the woman can escape and leave the groom’s family. If the bride leaves the family, there is a high chance that her parents will go to the police. Therefore, the task of a bride-kidnapper’s family is to persuade the bride to stay in their house by all means. This task is usually realized by the female relatives of the family and

mother-in-law particularly. The awareness of legal cases makes the bride-kidnapper and his family more persistent in their persuasion actions. Hence, these legal prosecutions do not restrict the practice of bride-kidnapping but in contrast leave less chance to women for escaping them. As a result, the “state’s involvement” serves to reinforce the practice of bride-kidnapping.

In addition, as it came out during the interviews, the legal cases the interviewees heard about did not go far. Surprisingly, as after such cases occur, they are typically solved between the families by “mutual agreement”. Hence, the reason why these cases appear at all is the desire of a bride-kidnapped woman’s family to wipe off the stains that the act of bride-kidnapping causes. It may also help to prevent other attempts of bride-kidnapping by other men or the one who tried to bride-kidnap the woman but failed to leave her in his family. According to the interviewees, the legal cases of bride-kidnapping are not a new phenomenon nowadays; all of them could remember examples from their relatives’ and acquaintances’ experience that referred to the present time. The shared stories had a similar ending which did not lead to the final arrest of the bride-kidnapper or any judicial hearing, i.e. the families agreed between themselves.

Thus, the state’s involvement and its legal defense from the act of bride-kidnapping, which could be seemingly viewed as the space for bride-kidnapped women’s resistance and security, functions on a superficial level. Even though legal coercion limits actions of a bride-kidnapper to some extent, it also reinforces this practice as its main actors, namely the bride-kidnapper and his family, become accustomed to the new conditions<sup>10</sup>. The letter of consent is one of such adjusted elements that was introduced for the bride-kidnapper’s safety. The present

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<sup>10</sup> However, I do not exclude here the cases when the women themselves or their own families can be equal actors of bride-kidnapping practice. I am referring to the cases when women agree with the men about the act of bride-kidnapping beforehand. Ethan Wilensky-Landford in his analysis of the practice of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, discuss the cases where women themselves encourage their own bride-kidnapping, by different means. When a woman wants a particular man to marry her, she starts to advertise her availability for marriage through different tricks. (Wilensky-Landford 2003, 82)

analysis of the state's involvement in the issues of bride-kidnapping give grounds for a number of questions like: Where do people position the state's legal protection, or do they feel this protection at all? What is their attitude towards the state's involvement into the issues of bride-kidnapping? What is the connection between the practice of bride-kidnapping as a tradition in Kazakh society and unwillingness of people to share their "unpleasant experience", i.e. to pursue legal cases against bride-kidnappers?

The results of the research show that some bride-kidnapped women themselves are unwilling to reveal this "unpleasant experience" and prefer to keep it a secret from the public eye, whereas the parents of the woman are those who may want to sue the kidnapper. Therefore, bride-kidnapped women try to keep such cases away from the public. These cases can have different consequences, which are usually unfavorable for the women's reputation. I present later the case that demonstrates what consequences women may encounter as the result of the legal prosecutions of bride-kidnapping.

Mariyam, Aigul's mother, for example shared a legal case of bride-kidnapping, which she heard from her relatives. It was about a girl who was bride-kidnapped at the age of 16 and her parents sued the kidnapper, as she was not of age yet. The man was accused and imprisoned. The girl married within a year, also by bride-kidnapping, but this time she "agreed" to it. Mariyam referred to it as a "voluntary" marriage. She got pregnant quickly, but lost her child as the result of her husband's violent actions: he beat her when he learned of her "unpleasant and shameful" experiences of having been kidnapped once before.

If women or their families sue the bride-kidnapper, it becomes known to the public. Hence, once women had experienced an act of bride-kidnapping that was legally prosecuted there was no way to hide it from the public. There is a fear and stereotype that women being



bride-kidnapped lose their status of innocence and purity that woman have to possess to be able to marry into a “good family”. As was mentioned, the cases of bride-kidnapping cannot be kept from the public as it necessitates the involvement of many people from the families of the bride-kidnapped woman and kidnapper himself. Thus, it makes the publicity of legal cases more problematic.

People’s attitude towards the legality of this issue was similar in that all the interviewees referred to the legal prosecution of bride-kidnapping as extreme measures. Mariyam, who shared the afore-mentioned legal case of bride-kidnapping, was strongly against any legal proceedings towards bride-kidnapping. According to her, no one benefits from legal prosecutions. Referring back to the story, she added that that girl did not benefit from her actions either and should not have sued that bride-kidnapper in the first place. She also added that everything that happened after her second bride-kidnapping experience was a punishment for that girl: “She did wrong and was punished for that”. The interviewee was defending the bride-kidnapper, who mistakenly, according to her, got confused about her age and kidnapped her. Mariyam was confident that there was no need to deal with that issue on the legal level. Moreover, she was against accusing the bride-kidnapper’s in a crime as it happened simply as the result of the bride-kidnapper confusion. Mariyam considers such cases can be negotiated and there is no need for “extreme measures” like police or state involvement.

Moreover, the legal cases do not seem to influence the bride-kidnappers’ decisions much. According to the interviewees, men sometimes bride-kidnap women whom they hardly know. Sholpan, Aigerim’s mother, told a story about a bride-kidnapped woman who agreed to stay in the family without any attempts to escape and was peacefully expecting the continuation of the procedure. When her relatives came to the house of the bride-kidnapper, it turned out that she

was already married and had a child. She was a student and the kidnapper had seen her several times at the university. Afterwards he decided to kidnap her as he liked her. When asked why she did not confess about her actual marriage, the interviewee's answer was, "She did tell him from the very beginning. The problem is that all girls usually say such things when they are bride-kidnapped. They invent stories about their marriages and boy friends just to escape that act. Men usually do not pay attention to such stories". Thus, the bride-kidnappers do not seem to think seriously about their act when they want to bride-kidnap a particular woman.

One of the reasons for their careless behavior was explained by the argument presented in the forth chapter about children's long-life dependency on their parents in Kazakh society. A constant feeling of security is rooted in the younger generation, a feeling that the older generation will take care of them and solve any problems they confront. Thus, men do not often think about the possible consequences of their actions because the act of bride-kidnapping presupposes the involvement of his whole family. His families' involvement guarantees their support in case of any problems with bride-kidnapping.

Aigerim, another interviewee, described a case that she read in one of the local newspapers about the act of bride-kidnapping. The woman knew about the act of bride-kidnapped beforehand. The procedure started in a café where the kidnapper went with his friends and the woman he planned to bride-kidnap. The plan was to take the bride to the groom's house. However, she refused to go along and threatened to sue the man. She was found dead that evening on the road and as it turned out, the bride-kidnapper, who failed to persuade the girl to marry him, decided to kill her owing to potential legal consequences. Even though these procedures rarely result in real juridical hearings, they still entail financial implications for the

bride-kidnapper. This fact also motivates the bride's parents to sue the bride-kidnapper and some very often take advantage of the situation for their own benefit.

My interviewees positioned law and state involvement as something irrelevant in most of the cases. They strictly differentiated between consensual and non-consensual bride-kidnapping. However, even in the cases of non-consensual bride-kidnapping they did not see the state's involvement necessary as those cases could be decided between the sides without law's protection. This unwillingness to seek the support in the state can be explained by many factors. One of those factors is the role of publicity. The society is constructed in the way that the bride-kidnapped women even nowadays are not welcome to return home after bride-kidnapping. The bride's families generally do not favour a bride's decision to leave the new family. The reflections of all interviewed mothers to the question of how they would react to the bride-kidnapped woman return were similar. They were similar in a way that they considered the return of their daughters acceptable, but they also emphasized that daughters themselves should be aware of their actions and possible consequences. All interviewees mentioned that those women who returned after bride-kidnapping would hardly be able to get into a new family again.

Thus, the implicit attitudes of the families and the society itself have a great influence on the women's decisions to leave or stay in the groom's family after the act of bride-kidnapping. Hence, the cases of their return are very rare; I assume that this influence serves as a significant factor which can be referred to the external ones. By external factors I mean here those hidden factors, like insecure position of women's own families, age factor, social vision of an "ideal woman" equal to married woman and many others that influence women decisions to stay in the family of a bride-kidnapper or be bride-kidnapped. As was mentioned, state power and the law in the issues of bride-kidnapping have symbolic power. However, they sometimes work against the

practice of bride-kidnapping. Nowadays, there are more grounds to contest the practice of bride-kidnapping. How efficient it is to contest this practice is an arguable question because of other external factors that were discussed in this chapter and in the presented chapters.

## Conclusion

The body of literature that I discussed throughout the whole research sees the bride-kidnapping as the act that contains a set of disturbing procedures for women. The procedures that the practice entails are viewed as the main obstacles to women's free decision making in both consensual and non-consensual bride-kidnapping. In most of the cases these procedures do not presuppose the choice for women not to be bride-kidnapped or to leave the family of the bride-kidnapper. However, in my research, I looked beyond the borders of the ritual of bride-kidnapping and revealed that the choice is predetermined or conditioned by many other factors that occur before the women's bride-kidnapping.

To understand the factors that maintain the practice of bride-kidnapping that has passed the period from the pre-Soviet to post-Soviet time and remains in practice in contemporary Kazakhstan, I presented the analysis of bride-kidnapping within different frameworks. Besides the analysis of bride-kidnapping within the political changes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I viewed this act through the study of kinship relations system in Kazakhstan. I also studied the effectiveness of the state's legal involvement in the practice of bride-kidnapping from the perspective of people who are subject to this act. The experience of bride-kidnapped women and their families assisted in understanding of how they see and position the act of bride-kidnapping.

Through the analysis of women's interviews, I learnt what place the ritual of bride-kidnapping occupied in their lives. As the result of women's life experience analysis, I found out that bride-kidnapping was one of the easy ways to get married and create a new family. The marriage and family discourses are crucial for the women in Kazakhstan as these two are considered the main achievements in their lives. The marriage is a new step in the formation of

the woman's own family and turning point in the construction of her future life. The practice of bride-kidnapping is accepted as a normal phenomenon as primarily, it serves to sustain what is important for the women of Kazakhstan, i.e. family. The patrilineal kinship system of Kazakhs position women as those who contribute to maintaining patrilineal ties, i.e. patriarchy. To realize her responsibility, the woman must get married and give birth to a male child. Only after accomplishing her first responsibility, her position in the husband's family begins to grow. This discourse is imposed on women from their early age. They realize the importance of being married in their lives. The act of bride-kidnapping very often serves as a quick start of women's own families. By agreeing or staying in the family of the bride-kidnapper, they see as an opportunity of a new life and escape from the one they have in their families being under complete dependence on their parents. Despite that the life after bride-kidnapping has many difficulties, in some of the cases women do not even know their future husbands but still remain there in the hope of being rewarded through her loyalty to the kinship ties of her husband.

Many interviewed women agreed to stay in the families of the bride-kidnappers despite the plans they had had before the act and boyfriends whom they loved. They gave up everything they had for the hope to create their own families. The instability they felt about the relationship with their own boyfriends did not let them wait until they were ready to propose them. The knowledge of necessity of being married one day is a very strong factor that influences women's decisions to stay in the family of the bride-kidnapper or agree to be bride-kidnapped. Women often justify their "willingness" to stay with the family of a bride-kidnapper as the result of public opinion about her leaving. This publicity is also connected with the future marital life of a woman as the unpleasant experience of bride-kidnapping limits women's future chances to the marriage.

It was also interesting to learn how people who were subject to the act of bride-kidnapping saw the state's involvement and political changes in the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Those people, who lived during the Soviet time, agreed that the state's policies that restricted traditional marital practices did not succeed at that time and were still ineffective nowadays. They did not see the protection or necessity in protection from the law and state's side. Another interesting moment was that none of the interviewees mentioned the discourse of national identity in the connection to the resurgence of bride-kidnapping in contemporary Kazakhstan. There can be many explanations to this finding. One of them is the methodological structure of the interviews that did not give space to the women to elaborate more on this connection. Another possible explanation is that the interviewees do not see or notice the role of nationalism in the reinforcement of bride-kidnapping.

As the result of research, I found that women and their families presented bride-kidnapping as a part of a long-established tradition that was followed by each generation without questioning of this practice necessity. Since the implication of the bride-kidnapping results in maintaining marriage and family, this practice is taken for granted and supported by Kazakhs. Ineffectiveness of the state's involvement in the issues of bride-kidnapping is explained by the roots this practice occupies in the society. The change should come not only from the state's side but it should be interwoven with the change in consciousness of the peoples who practice bride-kidnapping.

The present research was also based on the interviews with the bride-kidnapped women and their mothers only, but there were no opportunity for conducting interviews with male members of their families or with bride-kidnappers. Therefore, the present research leaves the space to further examination of the bride-kidnapping, which can be extended by the experience

of other actors of this ritual. My findings open the room for questioning the factors that sustain the practice of bride-kidnapping in contemporary Kazakhstan as it suggests approaching the issues of bride-kidnapping from the experience of those who were subject to that act. Due to the limited time, I managed to conduct only six interviews with the bride-kidnapped women. Thus, my research can contribute or be extended by other scholars who would encompass a higher number of case studies based on the in-depth interviews with bride-kidnapped women and other members of their families both males and females.



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