

Gender, Bride Kidnapping, and Labor Migration in Kyrgyzstan (Extended abstract)

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Introduction

In the Kyrgyz Republic, some 20% to 30% of marriages are formed through a practice known locally as *ala kachuu*, which is usually translated into English as *bride kidnapping* or *bride abduction* (Becker et al. 2017; Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian 2015; Werner 2009). Both Kyrgyz and international researchers have analyzed the practice and meanings of *ala kachuu*, but questions of whether and how kidnap marriages are different from either arranged or love marriages remain to be answered. Research by Becker and colleagues, which shows that babies born within kidnap marriages have lower birth weights than those born into other types of marriages, indicates that kidnap marriages may be more stressful, at least for the wives (Becker et al. 2017). But the many other ways in which families formed through kidnap marriages may be different than other families have yet to be explored.

One of the ways in which families formed through kidnap marriages may be different is their members' participation in the process of labor migration and remittance sending. Kyrgyzstan is considered the fourth most remittance-dependent country in the world (World Bank 2017), and both international and domestic labor migration are common household survival strategies for Kyrgyz people (Sagynbekova 2006; Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). As much as one-fifth to one-third of Kyrgyzstan's working-age population lives abroad (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008; Vinokurov 2013), with many others working as internal migrants, mainly in the capital city of Bishkek and Osh City. The typical Kyrgyz migrant is young, is unemployed, and comes from a rural area (Olimova and Olimov 2007; Vinokurov 2013). In contrast to neighboring Central Asian states where female migration is uncommon, at least one-third of international migrants from Kyrgyzstan are women (FIDH 2016; Thieme 2008).

Why would bride kidnapping be related to migration? Researchers have long established that family formation is tied to migration behaviors (Massey et al. 2006; Massey and Espinosa 1997; Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian 2010; Sana and Massey 2007). In Kyrgyzstan, bride kidnapping might be an important additional factor to consider for two reasons. First, bride kidnapping may serve as a proxy for household gender norms. Sana and Massey (2005: 525) argue that the typical model of labor migration as a household economic strategy characterized by the sending of remittances to diversify household income is most relevant in societies such as Mexico, where the typical family is "cohesive and, owing to patriarchal norms, likely to honor contractual arrangements that ensure flows of remittances from family members abroad." Cross-national research highlights that these migration and remittance patterns are most typical in countries with stable, patriarchal families. In countries with less stable or more egalitarian families, there is more female migration, there is less remittance sending, and migration is often more of a move of desperation than a strategic household plan (Massey et al. 2006; Oishi 2005; Sana and Massey 2005, 2007). A similar pattern appears to exist at the household level as well. In Mexico, men are less likely to migrate from households with higher levels of female empowerment (Nobles and McKelvey 2015), and in the Republic of Georgia, women are more likely to migrate from households that express gender egalitarian views (Hofmann 2014).

Second, kidnap marriages may be less homogamous and less happy or otherwise less stable than other types of marriage (Becker et al. 2017). Marital stability matters for migration because migration can put a great deal of strain on a marriage. Frank and Wildsmith (2005) found that men's migration was associated with higher odds of union dissolution in Mexico. Migration has been linked to higher odds of union dissolution in other contexts as well, although specific patterns vary by country (Agadjanian and Hayford 2018; Caarls and Mazzucato 2015; Hu 2018; Locke et al. 2014). In Central Asia, labor migration is reported to be related to growing rates of unofficial divorces, although data on these informal union dissolutions is hard to come by (Najibullah 2009). Although migration as a cause of union dissolution has been more studied, it is also the case that union formation and dissolution can be causes of migration. Ortiz (1996) found that unmarried status, whether single or divorced, was an important predictor of emigration among Puerto Rican women. Other research, on both Latin American migration to the U.S. and Ghanaian migration to Europe, has found complex interrelationships between union dissolution and migration, with migration serving as both a cause and a result of dissolution (Caarls and de Valk 2017; Hill 2004).

Hypotheses

The existing literature leads us to three sets of hypotheses on the relationship between gender, bride kidnapping, and migration in Kyrgyzstan, which are detailed in Table 1. The first group of hypotheses assumes that when bride kidnapping occurs in a groom's household, it may serve as an indicator that patriarchal gender norms are particularly strong in that household. In this case, the effects of kidnapping should be felt at the household level; in other words, an individual need not be in a kidnap marriage to experience the effects of the kidnapping. Because strong patriarchal norms make a household more likely to use labor migration and remittances as a household investment strategy, we would expect that households in which any kidnap marriage has occurred will be more likely to send a migrant, particularly a male migrant. In households without a kidnap marriage, we would expect that migration would be associated with poverty rather than with investment.

The next two sets of hypotheses are related to the individual-level (or couple-level) effects of kidnapping. If kidnap marriages are less happy or less stable, there could be either a positive or a negative effect on migration. In what we refer to as the *marital instability hypotheses*, spouses in kidnap marriages are more worried about divorce than other types of married couples and therefore are more reluctant to engage in a risky activity such as migration. This would make individuals in kidnap marriages (both men and women) less likely than individuals in other types of marriage to migrate on their own but more likely to migrate as a couple. Alternatively, in what we refer to as the *marital disharmony hypotheses*, spouses (especially wives) in kidnap marriages are less happy at home and therefore more likely to migrate as a means of escape. In this scenario, we would expect higher odds of individual migration, especially among women, and lower odds of couple migration among individuals in kidnap marriages. We would also expect that the other individual- and household-level predictors of migration (sex, age, household wealth) would be less predictive of migration among individuals in kidnap marriages.

We also keep in mind that any relationship between bride kidnapping and migration has the potential to be spurious. Individuals in kidnap marriages may be different than individuals in other types of marriage in terms of age, socioeconomic status, or any number of other factors that could also impact their chances of migration. Because the factors that predict kidnap marriage in

Kyrgyzstan have not been studied, we simply include in our models as many control variables known to be associated with migration as we can. The predictors of migration have been well studied in a variety of contexts, including Kyrgyzstan, and include individual characteristics such as sex, age, education, and employment; household characteristics such as income, land ownership, and household composition; as well as community characteristics that we are unable to test (Agdjanian et al. 2008; Becker et al. 2003; Bohra and Massey 2009; Castaldo et al. 2005; Gubhaju and DeJong 2009; Hamilton and Villarreal 2011; Hofmann 2014; Kanaiaupuni 2000; Massey and Espinosa 1995; Yan and Guo 1999).

Table 1. Hypotheses

Group name	Individual or household level?	Specific hypotheses
Patriarchal norms	Household	<i>1a:</i> Households in which any kidnap marriage has occurred will be more likely to send a migrant, especially a male migrant. <i>1b:</i> Migration will be more strongly associated with poverty in households without kidnap marriages.
Marital instability	Individual	<i>2a:</i> Men and women in kidnap marriages will be less likely to migrate as individuals (without their spouse). <i>2b:</i> Men and women in kidnap marriages will have higher chances of migrating as a couple.
Marital disharmony	Individual	<i>3a:</i> Women in kidnap marriages will be more likely to migrate as individuals (without their spouse). <i>3b:</i> Men and women in kidnap marriages will be less likely to migrate as a couple. <i>3c:</i> Individual and household characteristics will be less predictive of migration among individuals in kidnap marriages.

Data

Data to test these hypotheses come from a household survey conducted in a rural, high-altitude district of Kyrgyzstan in 2017. A total of 1,233 households were surveyed in 13 villages of the Alay district of Osh Oblast. The villages are selected on the basis of a stratified random procedure with variation by (1) category (rayon, municipality, and regular), (2) population size, (3) elevation, and (4) remoteness. The village populations range from 224 to 11,691 people as of 2017. The village elevation ranges from 1,482 to 3,362 meters above the sea level. The surveys included a wide variety of questions about land use and agriculture, health and well-being, migration, and remittances. The instrument directly asked in questions about marital status whether the marriage in question was a kidnap marriage or not—an approach that has been successful in previous survey research in Kyrgyzstan (Becker et al. 2017; Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian 2015). In the survey, 26% of reported marriages were kidnapping-based marriages.

Methods

Our analytic sample includes all individuals aged 18 and older who were recorded as household members in the survey.¹ This includes both those residing in the household and those recorded as migrants in Kyrgyzstan or abroad at the time of the survey. A total of 35 individuals were removed from the sample due to missing data for our variables of interest, resulting a total sample of 3,180 individuals in 1,228 households.

Our dependent variable is whether or not the individual in question is a migrant (internal or international). In some analyses, migrants are split further into solo migrants and migrants who left as part of a couple. We measure marital status as a categorical variable, comprising those currently married without kidnapping, those currently married in a kidnap marriage, those never married, and those widowed or divorced. Some of those widowed or divorced were formerly in kidnap marriages; we tried alternate coding that either separated those formerly in kidnap marriages, or included them with those in current kidnap marriages, and found no differences in our results

Other individual-level variables include sex, age, age-squared, education, and employment. Education is broken into those with a high school or lower education (the vast majority of the sample had completed high school), those with some post-secondary education, and those with completed tertiary education. Employment is a dichotomous variable for whether the respondent is employed for wages, either full-time or part-time. Among migrants, employment is measured before migration; among all others it is measured at the time of the survey.

In addition to the individual-level variables, we include several household-level variables in our model. We measure the effects of kidnapping at the household level by coding households in which any member has ever been in a kidnap marriage as kidnap households. Kidnap households are nearly always headed by the kidnapping groom or his parents, because women in Kyrgyzstan almost never continue to live with their parents after marriage. We also measure household size, including migrants, and the percentage of household members who are children under 18. We include dichotomous variables for whether or not the household owns any land or livestock as well as for whether any member of the household receives any government benefits. Finally, we create an index of material goods ownership by taking the natural log of the total of all consumer goods (from a list of 13) that the household owns (Bollen et al. 2002).

In the final version of the paper, we will also include interaction terms between sex and marital status as well as between sex and other predictors of migration.

For our analyses, we will conduct multivariate logistic regression models predicting the odds of migration, first among the whole sample and then separately for each marital status group. Because individual respondents are clustered within households, we will use a clustered sandwich estimator to estimate robust standard errors. All analyses will be conducted in Stata 14 (StataCorp 2015).

Bivariate results

Survey data show limited differences between adults based on whether or not they are in kidnap marriages (see Table 2). Individuals currently in kidnap marriages are slightly older and somewhat less educated than married individuals in other marriage types. They are also slightly

¹ The legal age of marriage in Kyrgyzstan is 18. However, girls are sometimes kidnapped for marriage at younger ages. The survey did not ask about marital status of household members under the age of 18, so our data may undercount kidnap marriages.

more likely to be employed. However, these differences are small—much smaller than differences between married, never married, and widowed/divorced respondents. The greatest differences between those in kidnap versus non-kidnap marriages are in migration. There are nearly twice as many migrants in the non-kidnap category as in the kidnap category, although the never married category has by far the most migrants. Interestingly, the greatest difference between kidnap and other marriages is in couple migration; very few married individuals migrate solo, regardless of marriage type, but there are many more couple migrants among those in non-kidnap marriages.

Table 2. Characteristics of sampled adults by marital status

	Currently married—no kidnapping	Currently married—kidnapping	Never married	Widowed/divorced
% male	51.92	49.05	62.12	18.18
Mean age	41.44	43.40	24.32	56.15
% non-migrants	93.05	96.19	80.82	96.00
% solo migrants	1.53	1.73	19.18	4.00
% couple migrants	5.42	2.08	n/a	n/a
% high school or lower education	63.52	69.84	48.97	70.91
% some post-secondary education	16.91	17.33	20.92	15.64
% higher education	19.56	12.82	30.11	13.45
% employed	41.13	43.50	34.07	31.27
<i>N</i>	1,697	577	631	275

The picture is very different when we look at the household level (Table 3). Households in which any member has ever been in a kidnap marriage are more likely to include migrants. Just as there are only small differences between sampled adults according to whether they are in a kidnap marriage, the other differences between households according to whether or not they include a kidnap marriage are generally small. The largest difference between kidnap and non-kidnap households is in whether or not they receive government benefits, with 45% of kidnap households receiving benefits compared to only 37% of non-kidnap households. The bivariate analyses lead to two main conclusions: first, bride kidnapping is negatively associated with migration at the individual level but positively associated with migration at the household level, and second, migration behaviors are one of the key differences of outcomes between people exposed to kidnap marriages and those without such exposure.

Table 3. Characteristics of households by kidnapping status

	Households with no kidnapping	Households with kidnapping
% including any migrant	11.67	18.60
Mean household size	4.12	4.77
Mean percent children in household	33.34	34.85
% owning land	58.09	60.23
% owning livestock	68.01	66.51
% receiving government benefits	37.26	45.12
Mean material goods index	1.81	1.81
<i>N</i>	797	430

Discussion and next steps

We are continuing to work on multivariate models, but preliminary results show that the individual-level effects of kidnapping on migration are explained by differences in household-level characteristics (such as household size and land ownership). The household-level effects of kidnapping are explained by other household characteristics among women but not among men. Living in a household where kidnapping has occurred results in higher odds of migration among the young, single men of that household—results that support the patriarchal norms pathway.

Preliminary results also indicate that the predictors of migration vary for individuals in kidnap marriages versus other types of marriage as well as between those living in kidnap versus no-kidnap households. However, the variation in predictors is not entirely in line with the predictions of the original hypotheses, indicating that the relationship between bride kidnapping and migration is more complex than originally expected. We are continuing to explore whether gender interaction terms or a distinction between individual and couple migration will help clarify these relationships.

We expect that our findings will add to the small body of literature that shows how internal dynamics of households shape migration. Although Kyrgyzstan’s context of bride kidnapping is unique to the country, the underlying issues of gender norms and marital satisfaction are universal. Our findings demonstrate the importance of looking at internal household dynamics, including marital homogamy and power dynamics between spouses, when studying how households engage in labor migration.

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