

I am Jamilia

"He liked me, the man who kidnapped me, but I DID NOT like him. I could not imagine myself with him, couldn't imagine it at all. And here is the result. After the abduction, I took some pills, I felt in a coma, and I became an invalid (chronically emotional distress). I want to ask him - How is your life going?

My life is broken.

I am lonely. Sick",

writes a woman from Kyrgyzstan who became a victim of the custom Ala Kachuu, which means roughly translated "grab and run." Bride kidnapping appears particularly in rural parts of the country, although Kyrgyzstan outlawed it in 2013. Nowadays, still, around 12.000 to 15.000 women are kidnapped annually for marriage according to the latest available data in Kyrgyzstan. This means statistically, every 40 minutes, one woman in Kyrgyzstan is kidnapped.

"I am Jamilia" focuses on women of different ages and from different parts of Kyrgyzstan. Each woman has her own story. But all of them have one in common: they all have been kidnapped to get married. Some victims described the brutality of this practice. Often a group of young men grabs a young woman or even a high school student in broad daylight on the street. They take her violently into a car and drive away, no matter if she is in panic, struggling, screaming, and weeping. Once abducted, the young woman is taken immediately to the informed and waiting family of the would-be groom and subjected to psychological pressure by his female relatives. In too many cases, the groom will rape his kidnapped bride to prevent her from returning home due to shame.

Bride kidnapping is a custom with deep roots; it raised and got a massive problem after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Advocates see Ala Kachuu as an old Kyrgyz tradition.

'A good marriage starts with tears,' says a famous Kyrgyz proverb. And although I am originally from Kyrgyzstan, I only began to understand the violence behind this proverb and the depth of the wounded souls they left when I met Jamilia. She is named after the main character from the worldwide known novel "Jamilia" of Chingiz Aitmatov. A story of two young lovers who leave their village and break a strong tradition to be able to live together. A story which tells with melancholy and full of tenderness the power of love that overrides everything. But countless stories of Kyrgyz women are stories of pain and tears.

Slowly there is an increasing reflection also on the psychological implications of those affected. Especially women who suffered lifelong under their traumatic experience being kidnapped want a different start into a marriage for their children, both for their daughters and for their sons.

"I am Jamilia" shall not only give voice to those women who became victims of bride kidnapping. Furthermore, it shall include an emphasis on the glimmer of hope for a change in Kyrgyzstan. Despite the stories of tragedy, all these women continued life after being kidnapped. Nonetheless, all of them did not lose hope that bride kidnapping will one day belong to the past of Kyrgyzstan.