

Azeri Bride Kidnappers Risk Heavy Sentences

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Lawmakers have cracked down, but activists fear promise of long prison terms for kidnappers may prove hollow.

In a fabric shop in Baku two young saleswomen are chatting, evidently about personal matters. "Maybe he talks like that because he wants to kidnap you?" said one woman who looks to be the elder of the two.

Perhaps they aren't aware of it, but wannabe grooms who follow this ancient tradition now risk long prison terms.

Sentences for bride kidnapping were extended over a month ago, when Azerbaijan's parliament, under pressure from human rights groups and the international community, voted to equate the crime with the much more serious offence of kidnapping.

Now men whose courtship ritual involves snatching a complete stranger off the street and forcing her to get married are liable to go to prison for ten years – a three-fold increase.

Kidnapping brides in Azerbaijan, as in many Caucasian and Central Asian countries, is a longstanding and controversial tradition seen by some as a harmless way of saving money on a wedding and by others as a barbaric violation of human rights.

Saida Gojamanli, lawyer and head of the Human Rights and Legislation Protection Bureau, a human rights NGO, stands firmly in the abuse camp and says the legislation is long overdue. "For women and our future it is very important," she said.

"This is the first step - we also expect other laws from the state which will make women's lives easier."

The kidnappings comes in various guises from forced abductions to a more harmless type of elopement when brides agree to be "kidnapped" – often with the consent of their parents – to save on wedding expenses and a dowry.

These staged kidnappings take place very much like the real ones with cries for help from the woman as she is forced into a car in front of frightened passers-by. Usually, however, the bride-to-be spends the night at the home of her future husband, then his family registers the marriage and a modest ceremony is held.

Rustam, 25, told IWPR he once witnessed a bride being "kidnapped".

He said a car containing four men drove up to the institute where he studies. They were smiling and joking and one had a video camera. When a group of girls came out of the building they grabbed one and dragged her into the car.

"My friend and I ran up to them, and tried to find out what was going on. But the guy with the camera who was filming everything stopped us and said that this was a specially planned staged kidnapping, for the

wedding tape," he said.

There are also couples whose families are opposed to their relationship who fake a kidnapping so they can run away together. There has been much speculation in the Azeri press over what would happen if the parents of a woman in this situation complained to the police, as the new law makes no allowance for brides who agree to be kidnapped and the punishment for their "abductor" is the same.

"I think that the law needs to be re-examined, and punishment should only be applied if there was a forced kidnapping," said one young man, who gave his name as Amil. "These are our traditions and mentality after all, which need to be respected just like human rights."

Ulviya, a student from Shamkir, said "if the kidnapping took place with the woman's agreement and her parents go to the police, then a prison sentence of 10 years is too long".

Sudaba Shiraliev, director of the NGO Women and the Modern World, believes the new legislation was passed too quickly and doubts it will be successful.

"To apply punishment, an official statement to the police is required, and I am not sure that rural people will all rush to write statements against each other," she said. "Perhaps in Baku the new law will have some affect, but in the countryside I think the affect will be insignificant."

Despite the controversy, most agreed, however, that the practice of forced abductions is unacceptable.

In this situation, a young man and several of his friends take a woman to the home of his parents, either by force or deception. She is left there for the night and is sometimes raped. Her new relatives tell her she is no longer pure and chaste and talk of the disgrace to her family if she tries to return home.

Women who have fled back to their families have gone so far as to visit a doctor for a certificate saying they are still a virgin. However, a gynaecologist interviewed by IWPR, Gulustan Aslanova, says this carries little weight in the countryside where many people think that once a girl is kidnapped she must simply accept her new life and family.

"If a woman has been kidnapped, and she returns home, her chances of marrying in future are reduced," agreed Egyana, a journalist and mother of a teenage girl from Mingechevir in the northeast of Azerbaijan.

She calls bride kidnapping a backwards custom and said if her daughter was abducted she would go to the police rather than allow her to live "life in hell". "It is better never to marry than live your life with a person you don't love," she said.

Thirty-nine-year-old Nargiz wasn't so lucky. When she was kidnapped at the age of 20 after accepting a ride home from a co-worker, she begged her mother and sister for help. However, they refused to let her come home, saying they were afraid of getting a bad reputation.

"I prayed to my mother on my knees to take me home," said Nargiz, whose husband beat her and drove her from the house when he got drunk.

Even more sinister are reports of kidnapped brides being taken abroad or used as slaves at home.

“There have been cases when girls were abducted and used as housekeepers,” said Saida Gojamanli from the Human Rights and Legislation Protection Bureau.

“There are also many cases when women are kidnapped to be sold abroad. And all this takes place to a large degree because of the poorly organised work of the law-enforcement bodies.”

She now calls on the police to be vigilant in enforcing the new law, especially in the regions where the majority of kidnappings occur.

“If at least one or two kidnappers are punished, this will be a lesson for others,” said Gojamanli.

Sabina Kiryashova is an IWPR contributor in Baku.

Location: [Azerbaijan](#)

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