Chechen Bride Snatching On The Rise

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Chechen and Ingush women are being abducted for wives in the name of tradition.

Living in his crowded parental home in a Chechen village, 28-year-old Aslan D. has his eye on the woman he wants to marry and set up his own home with.

For two years now, having built and done up a house amid all the difficulties of the war, he has been wooing his chosen one - the only problem being that she doesn't agree.

"I have met a lot of girls, but after five or ten minutes' conversation I lose all interest in them," says Aslan outlining his quest. "My heart belongs only to Madina, but she doesn't want me."

Then his sad eyes sparkle with determination, "She will be my wife! I will steal her, as I've helped steal five brides for my friends - and good marriages came out of it. Madina will come to love me when she knows me better."

After nine years of conflict and violence in which Chechnya's male population has been decimated, such an eligible husband as Aslan should by rights be worth his weight in gold. But he is not prepared to shift his attentions to one of the many other unmarried women.

Aslan's unrequited dreams of a life with Madina are fanned by the growing popularity of bride-stealing. It is an old practice found amongst Chechens and their ethnic kin the Ingush, although it is technically punishable by law and many families take a dim view of it.

Madina, for one, no longer goes out alone since Aslan has told her family of his feelings.

"Generally it happens like this," explained Chechen ethnographer Zalpa Bersanova. "Young people [relatives or friends of the would-be bridegroom] go up to the girl and announce, 'From now on, with Allah's blessing, you are one of us.' Then they force her into a car and take her away. The girl of course resists and protests."

The woman is then taken to the home of a friend or relatives of the groom, after which a delegation of older people visits her parents to try to formalise the deal.

Aina, 19, worked in a flower-shop in the Ingush town of Nazran. One evening four men she did not know came in and ordered a basket of flowers.

"As I was choosing the flowers, one of them seized me by the waist and dragged me out of the shop to a car," Aina remembers. "At first I didn't understand what was going on. My sisters tried to rescue me, but two of the guys held them back.

"I tried to resist but what could I do against two strong men? They threw me in the car and took me away and my terrified sisters were left on the doorstep with a pile of roses."
Carted off to a village, all that Aina knew about her would-be husband was that he was 21.

A whole night of persuasions and threats followed as she was ferried between his relatives and friends before police - summoned by her family - intervened.

"They took me to the old people, I said I didn't agree and they took me home. I arrived at six in the morning. When I was with my family again I couldn't hold back the tears and then I fell asleep, not believing I had been saved. That was the worst night of my life. I don't envy anyone who has to go through that."

Tamila, a 20-year-old student at Nazran University, was snatched on her way to a class. Her determined suitor turned out to be a 24-year old who had no job and had not been to university.

"I hoped that when I mentioned my boyfriend, he would calm down, but he got even angrier," Tamila said. "He began to threaten that he would deprive me of my honour and I would be forced to stay with him. I said I would rather die than live with a beast like him.

"A fight broke out in the courtyard and they were going to take me somewhere else. But luckily the father of the boy turned out to be a decent man and when he heard I didn't agree, he just put me in his car and took me home."

In other cases however the woman is forced to give in and a marriage takes place. It may even work out.

Bersanova is herself the product of such a wedding, her mother snatched at only 15 but going on to spend more than 50 years with her abductor and raise 10 children. In more recent case, the ethnographer said she knew of a woman called Fatima, an Ingush who lived in Grozny, "stolen" when very young by a man she hardly knew.

The girl's family was outraged with the man, and he spent three years in jail for the abduction. Upon his release, he went back and wooed Fatima so persistently that she ended up agreeing to marry him - and it has proved a successful match.

It is stories such as these that encourage hot-headed youths to dream of abducting brides.

Ethnographers like Said-Magomed Khasiev, who works for Chechnya's Republican Museum, condemn modern-day snatchings as "hooliganism" which have no place in Chechen tradition.

"Using violence against women, whatever nice justifications they use for it, is an outrageous violation of traditional marriage customs," argued Khasiev.

He says that Chechen custom values the free expression of will by young people, promoting sinmarsho or "freedom of the soul," with a relaxed approach to both marriage and divorce.

For a marriage to take place, a mullah comes to the house and after checking that the couple and their parents agree, performs a blessing. Divorce is even easier, with the husband simply declaring in the
presence of two witnesses, "From this moment you are no longer my wife."

But whatever the historical accuracy, instances of bride-stealing now appear to be on the rise in both Chechnya and Ingushetia.

"The deterrent of criminal punishment which existed in Soviet times has gone," said Bersanova. "Now total legal chaos reigns in Chechnya, and against that background stealing a bride to start a family looks like a minor offence."

In a bid to throw light on the situation, Khasiev has recently started a programme of cultural education, including publishing a brochure on Chechen customs and etiquette.

But until more people like Aslan get around to reading it, abductions will continue.

Witnesses tell of a girl recently snatched in the village of Shali right in front of a Russian soldier. When the girl cried for help, the Russian only smiled and said, "But that's your tradition!"

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