

Georgia: Sad Plight of Underage Brides

Author: [Ramilya Alieva](#)

Teenage Azerbaijani girls in Georgia often have no choice but to marry young.

"I do not want to get married. I want to continue my studies and become a doctor," said Sevil Allazkyzy. Small and fragile with a childlike body, Sevil is only 11 years old, and all her grades are excellent. She is the best student in the seventh form of the school in the village of Ferma in the Kaspi District of Georgia. However, the main topic of discussion at home now is the intention to get her married this year.

"I was in Turkey last year," the girl said. "We were taken for an excursion there. I spoke with 11-year-old girls there. I asked them, 'When are you going to get married?' And they said that they are not going to get married until they finish their studies. I too want to finish my studies. Why can't I carry on at school?"

Sevil has few chances of achieving her ambition. From the eighth form in school – or roughly the age of 13 – there are only boys in the schools in Azerbaijani villages in the Kvemo Kartli province of Georgia. At this age, girls are either married or engaged and will soon get married.

In Georgia, teenagers of 14 can get married if the parents agree to the match, while those without such consent have to wait until they are aged 16.

"Hard as we may try to convince the parents, we cannot influence them," Sevil Alieva, Georgian-language teacher of the Georgian language in the Ferma school, told IWPR. "They still marry off their underage daughters."

She said that many of the girls in her village have had a couple of children by the time they reach 15.

"Our school has a lot of problems," said school headmaster Dato Kotolashvili. "Basically the building is falling apart and we rarely have electricity. However, we hold all lessons, trying to maintain the teaching at a fair level.

"Ninety-nine per cent of our students are ethnic Azerbaijanis. There are a total of 240 children in the school, mainly boys, as girls do not go to school from the fifth or seventh forms and we do not have one girl in the eighth form. It is true that we have three in the ninth form, but all of them are Georgians."

With an estimated population of 300,000, Georgia's Azerbaijanis are one of its largest ethnic minorities, but their frequently poor command of the Georgian language and alienation from rule by Tbilisi mean that their problems receive less attention than those of other ethnic groups.

There are 250 families in Ferma, and almost all of them are Azerbaijanis. People earn their living here by trade, making shuttle trips to Turkey and Saudi Arabia and importing clothes, household appliances, crockery, and so forth and selling their goods at the big marketplace in Lilo outside Tbilisi.

Women are the main workforce in many of the families. They give birth to and raise children, keep the house and, at the same time, most of them make trips to purchase goods and then stand and trade all day long to sell them.

Shikhali Ismailov, head of Ferma Administration, said that the marriages of underage girls are a problem not only in Ferma but also in all the villages in Kvemo Kartli.

"We constantly try to convince them not to do this," he told IWPR. "This result is almost universal lack of young people in the Azerbaijani community who could become specialists in the future. Parents marry off their sons and daughters very early. Studies do not mean anything to them."

"I do not like these traditions at all," Sevil's classmate Elvira Kurbanova, who is also an excellent student, told IWPR.

"I am so happy that my parents [have] promised that they will not force me to get married. They promise to help me in receiving a higher education. However, most of the parents in our village are quite different. One of my friends was married off immediately after she was 11. She almost died when she was giving birth to her child recently."

Elvira said that parents often do not force their daughters to get married. They just persuade them, describing the presents they will receive from the fiancé's family, the dresses and golden decorations they will have. "Some girls are so foolish that they swallow this bait," Elvira said with contempt.

She believes that it will not be very easy for her to live in this village in a couple of years. "You cannot find

a single unmarried 15-year-old girl here. If you are not married at the age of 17, you are regarded as a lost cause and a spinster," 11-year-old Elvira said.

"Unfortunately, this is a really ugly practice in the Azerbaijani villages of Georgia," said Islam Aliev, correspondent for the Gurcusan newspaper published in Tbilisi in the Azerbaijani language.

"There is a similar problem in Azerbaijan's mountain villages. It is true that all Muslim peoples had this tradition previously but we are in the 21st century now. We should do all we can to persuade parents that this tradition is harmful not only for the health of their children but also for the entire nation."

But traditional attitudes are hard to change. "My daughter is already nine. Why should she go on studying? She has learned to speak Georgian and that is sufficient," said Gulali Huseinov, a Ferma resident.

"I will marry her off in two or three years. The only thing I want is a rich fiancé. We will organise a good wedding party for them. When my wife and I married, I was 17 and she was 12. Does this mean that we have lived badly?"

Villagers of Ferma, like many other Azerbaijani villages in Kvemo Kartli, are indeed relatively well off. There are many two-storey houses in good condition bought with profits from the shuttle trade.

"The situation has become so good that even a kindergarten was opened in our village," villager Khatuna Mirzelikyzy told IWPR. "Previously, when we went to Lilo to sell our goods, we had to leave our children alone. I can now stay there calmly without being nervous about something bad happening to my children at home."

The house of little Sevil's parents is also large and beautiful. However, nowadays when she comes home from school she sadly observes the rose silk kerchief fluttering over the gate. This is a traditional sign used by families who have young girls to marry off.

Sevil cannot defy her father. His word is law for her, just like her husband's word will be in the future.

Ramilya Alieva is a correspondent with Georgian Public Television in Tbilisi.

Location: [Turkey](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Georgia](#)
[Azerbaijan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-sad-plight-underage-brides>