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**Challenging narratives on bride kidnapping in
Kyrgyzstan: the case of Women's Non-Governmental
Organisations**

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Abstract

As bride kidnapping has grown associated with Kyrgyzstan, so has the literature on this issue in academia. The rich existing body of work, however, in focusing on political-elite driven reinforcement of tradition in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan's search for national identity, often overlooks the societal narratives that justify the practice through the promotion of conservative discourses. It also ignores the important and relevant question of how to end bride kidnapping and who could lead this social change. This thesis, therefore, in order to fill these gaps, studies the narratives articulated by local women's Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) working on the issue of bride kidnapping. It does so through interviews with nine representatives of seven Bishkek based-women's NGOs. This research aims to reveal whether these local actors challenge dominant narratives on this practice, and if so, how and for what purpose. In finding that women's NGOs largely comply with theoretical assumptions of counter-narrative theory, this research suggests that they can be considered actors of contestation and change on the issue of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, as long as the political context allows them to operate on the ground. Overall, this study brings to the fore the up until now invisible social forces that are local women's NGOs.

Key words: bride kidnapping, women's NGOs, Kyrgyzstan, women's rights, narratives, counter-narratives

Table of content

1. Introduction.....	7
2. Context.....	10
3. Literature review.....	14
3.1 Conceptualisation.....	14
Bride kidnapping.....	14
Retraditionalisation.....	19
3.2 Gaps in the literature.....	23
4. Theoretical framework.....	25
Counter-narrative theory.....	25
5. Methodology and methods.....	31
(Counter-)narrative inquiry.....	31
Case selection.....	32
Method and data collection.....	33
Analytical strategies.....	35
Limitations of the study.....	38
Ethical considerations.....	38
6. Presentation of findings.....	40
Women’s NGOs and the master-narrative on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.....	41
Purpose of engagement on bride kidnapping and articulation of narratives.....	46
Means through which women’s NGOs articulate narratives.....	52
Challenges to women’s NGOs articulation of narratives on bride kidnapping.....	60
7. Discussion.....	64
8. Conclusion.....	71
Bibliography.....	73
Appendices.....	81
Appendix 1: dates of interviews.....	81
Appendix 2: Interview questions.....	81
Appendix 3: Plain language statement.....	82
Appendix 4: Participant consent form.....	85
Appendix 5: University of Glasgow ethical approval.....	88

1. Introduction

“There was a time when the punishment for the theft of a sheep was much higher than for the kidnapping of a woman. It’s absurd and shows how women are seen in this country. And it is very sad.” (Respondent A)

In May 2018, Burulai Turdaaly Kyzy, a 20 year-old woman who had been abducted near Bishkek for forced marriage, was killed by her kidnapper in a police precinct after Kyrgyz law enforcement allowed the victim and the perpetrator to be in a room alone together (Toktonazarova, 2018). Three years later, in April 2021, Aizada Kanatbekova was kidnapped by a group of men in broad daylight in downtown Bishkek. Days after the abduction, she was found dead in a car along with the body of one of her kidnappers, who had committed suicide after killing her for refusing to marry him. Although the abduction was recorded on security cameras, the police were sharply criticised for their slow response and dismissing the so-called ‘bride-kidnapping’ as a mere Kyrgyz tradition that would end in a happy wedding ceremony (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2021). These two cases, which highlighted the police’s reluctance in pursuing this crime, sparked outrage and large protests in Kyrgyzstan.

The practice of abducting a woman for marriage is known in Kyrgyz as *Ala Kachuu*. The rich literature on the subject highlights the existence of the practice in two forms, consensual bride kidnapping and non-consensual, or forced, bride kidnapping. In a country in which most citizens hold a traditional worldview, and tradition is often deemed of higher value than civil or religious law (Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013, p. 59), the academic debate also revolves around the historical legitimacy of this practice. While some argue that *Ala Kachuu* is an ancient *tradition* predating Soviet-era Kyrgyzstan, others posit that it was ‘revived’ in the post-Soviet era in the so-called gendered ‘retraditionalisation’ process, which took place in the 1990s. Despite these academic arguments, there exists a relative consensus on the fact that bride kidnapping, in both its forms, continues to take place in contemporary society.

A study conducted in 2011-2012 found that, although the practice has always been illegal, 38% of ethnic Kyrgyz married women and 31% of men had been married through bride kidnapping (UNDP, 2021, p. 3). Today, bride kidnapping for the purpose of forced

marriage is prohibited under Article 172 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code and punishable by imprisonment from five to seven years, and up to ten years in the case of a minor (Kyrgyz Republic, 2021)¹. It also continues to spark controversy and concern for human rights internationally. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2021 noted “with concern that the prevalence of non-consensual bride kidnapping, child marriage and forced marriage remains high despite their criminalisation” (2021, p. 16).

The reasons for the persistence of bride kidnapping in contemporary Kyrgyzstan are heavily debated, both in the academic literature and across citizens and representatives of civil society. Various narratives on the issue have emerged and continue to shape how it is perceived, justified, accepted or resisted. A combination of institutional behaviours, as illustrated by the flawed legal system in the cases outlined above, and societal attitudes, informed by deeply rooted patriarchal and traditional understandings of marriage and gender norms and roles, is observable today (CEDAW, 2022, p. 8). While both institutional behaviours and societal attitudes shape the narratives around the practice of bride kidnapping, societal attitudes have been broadly disregarded in the research on the practice. In addition, questions as to how to end this harmful practice and who could be the actors in this change have slowly arisen in academia, but remain scarce.

The focus of this research is thus to, within the field of gendered retraditionalisation, study the narratives articulated by local women’s Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) around bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. Examining the engagement of women’s NGOs on this issue, in a bottom-up approach, aims to reveal whether dominant narratives on this topic are challenged by these local social actors and, if so, how and for what purpose. As such, this study is guided by the following main research questions, as well as four sub-questions that will provide insight to answer the overall research query:

To what extent do women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan articulate counter-narratives regarding the case of bride kidnapping?

1. How do women’s NGOs position themselves vis-à-vis the existing narratives around bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan?

¹ This legislation has changed over time. Until 2019 and the introduction of a new Criminal Code, bride kidnapping was prohibited under Article 155. In 2013, the punishment for this practice was increased from up to five years imprisonment, as it has been since 1997, to up to seven-ten years.

2. In light of the narratives they articulate, for what purpose do women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct their work on bride kidnapping?
3. How do women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct their work on bride kidnapping and how does it reflect the narratives they articulate?
4. What challenges do women's NGOs face in regards to their articulation of narratives and to the achievement of their objectives on bride kidnapping?

Framed around counter-narrative theory and supported by a counter-narrative inquiry methodological approach, this study analyses nine interviews conducted with seven Bishkek-based NGOs to answer these questions. It suggests that women's NGOs working on bride kidnapping articulate counter-narratives on this issue by deconstructing an identified master-narrative, demonstrating broad social and transformational goals around this practice, and targeting, as one of its various groups, the marginalised and oppressed group of women and girls. Moreover, the main contribution of this study to the academic literature, is, through counter-narrative theory, the establishment of women's NGOs as actors of contestation and change on the issue of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.

This thesis is structured around eight chapters: Chapter 2, after this introduction, provides contextual background to this study, presenting a brief overview of Kyrgyzstan's historical and geopolitical situation, an overview of civil society development, and women's NGOs, in the country, as well as the key contemporary challenges facing civil society; Chapter 3 consists of a literature review of the issue of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, conceptualising the main terms and providing necessary definitions for the following analysis, as well as highlighting the identified gaps in the literature that this study aims to address; Chapter 4 outlines the chosen theoretical framework for this analysis, namely counter-narrative theory; Chapter 5 outlines the chosen methodology and methods, including a presentation of counter-narrative inquiry, the case selection and data collection processes, the analytical strategies to systematically present the obtained data, the limitations of this research and the ethical considerations applicable to this thesis; Chapter 6 presents the findings obtained in this research; Chapter 7 interprets the data in light in the theoretical framework and answers the stated research questions; and the final part provides conclusions to this research and reflects on the practical implications on this study's findings, which will also be put in light of the identified gaps in the academic literature on bride kidnapping, opening up to potential future research.

2. Context

Located in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is a Turkic-speaking Republic with a nomadic tradition, today home to almost 7 million people who are majoritarily sunni Muslim (Biard, 2010, p. 323; World Bank, 2022). After having been incorporated into the Russian Empire in the late 19th century and the Soviet Union in the 1920s, in 1991 the country gained independence from Russia without mass mobilisation or political struggle (Pierobon, 2018, p. 113). In this context, the liberal orientation of Kyrgyzstan's first President Askar Akayev, which was seen as an avenue to alleviate severe socio-economic problems, made the country a prime target for foreign investment aimed at promoting democratisation and political reform (Hoare, 2016, p. 281; Pierobon, 2018, p. 114). One of the main objectives of this foreign multi-million dollar investment was to seed a Western-style civil society into the newly independent Central Asian state, and thus prevent authoritarian backlash from Soviet-era leaders still in power (Pierobon, 2018, p. 114). Civil society, commonly conceived as the "unofficial and autonomous social movement within a society" and thus a counterpart to the state, is most often associated with the work of NGOs (Connery, 2000, p. 9; Pierobon, 2018, p. 129). In the 1990s, the NGO sector grew enormously in Kyrgyzstan and came to characterise the country's vibrant and robust civil society, especially in comparison to its neighbours², leading to observers labelling Kyrgyzstan the 'island of democracy' (Pierobon, 2018, p. 109).

Among the most common NGOs to be established during the flourishing period of the 1990s were 'women's organisation's' expressing the specific needs of women in the country, and inscribing their work in the "secular language of democracy and human rights" (Bekebayeva et al., 2019, p. 137; Simpson, 2010, p. 179). The large number of these so-called 'women's' NGOs was fuelled by the growing influence of the gender agenda and gender mainstreaming within developmental thinking and foreign funding in the 1990s (Hoare, 2016, p. 282; Mukhamejan, 2022, p. 4). Such NGOs were, moreover, majoritarily run by highly educated and professional women who entered the field of activism after becoming unemployed in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse and the retraditionalisation process that removed women from places of work. (Sultanalieva, 2023, p. 77). While there exists great

² Kyrgyzstan's neighbours are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. In 1998, Freedom House considered Kyrgyzstan 'Partly Free' in its freedom index, while its neighbours were classified as 'Not Free' (Kaplan & Freedom House, 1998).

varieties of women's' NGOs', political representation, female entrepreneurship and domestic violence are the key issues most NGOs worked on, while providing independent research data and raising concerns on the situation of women's rights in Kyrgyzstan to the international community (Sultanalieva, 2023, p. 78). Through the creation of women's NGOs, women's issues were gradually "displaced from politics to the civil society sector" (Mukhamejan, 2022, p. 9). As a result, women's NGOs replaced the Kyrgyzstani state's actions on women's issues by becoming the main providers of social services and resources, such as emergency shelter and legal advice (Regulska & Włodarczyk, 2022, p. 25). Here it is important to note that 'women's' NGOs do not equate with feminist groups (Fabian, Lazda, et al., 2022, p. 91). In a context where *gender* and *feminism* are often considered Western concepts, and therefore not indigenous to Kyrgyzstan, the feminist movement remains marginal (Peshkova, 2022b, p. 362; Shakirova, 2008, p. 2). For sake of clarity, the term 'women's NGOs' will thus be used throughout this thesis to represent independent organisations working on issues of women's rights and will stay away from the debates around *feminism* in Kyrgyzstan.

In the early 2000s, Kyrgyz civil society played a major role in the destitution of two leaders, first President Askayev in the Tulip Revolution in 2005³ and then President Bakiev in 2010, and thus consolidated its position in the public sphere (Pierobon, 2018, p. 109). However, despite the stated openness of the government to civil society and the proliferation of NGOs, cracks in this tolerance are numerous, especially for politically-oriented organisations who have slowly become the targets of harassment and intimidation by the authorities (Civicus Monitor, 2021; Pierobon, 2018, p. 119). The strength and resilience of Kyrgyz civil society has been most visible in the public debate and repeated mobilisation against draft Foreign Agent Laws or 'anti-NGO' draft legislation (Pierobon, 2018, p. 123).⁴ In a global context of increased restrictions on civil society space, as part of a broader phenomenon of 'democratic recession' (Diamond, 2015) or 'autocratisation', the Kyrgyz government first tried to introduce a Foreign Agent Law in 2013 (Berger-Kern et al., 2021, p. 84). After a hard-fought

³ The 2005 Tulip Revolution was one of the Colour Revolutions, popular non-violent protests to overthrow post-Communist authoritarian regimes, that took place in the post-Soviet space at the turn of the century (Ó Beacháin & Polese, 2010).

⁴ The original Foreign Agent Law was introduced by Russia in 2012. It stipulates that any organisation that receives funding from abroad (has foreign donors) must declare themselves as 'foreign agents', and as such must undergo additional audits and other bureaucratic challenges. This law has been severely criticised by the international community and human rights NGOs, which found that its application creates a "basis for unwarranted interferences with the freedom of expression and freedom of association" (International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), 2014)

campaign from local NGOs and support from the international community, the bill was eventually quashed in 2016 (Idem 2021). Most recently, in March 2023, Kyrgyzstan's Parliament brought back this draft law, but once again strong civil society push back obtained a small victory, namely getting the Parliament to postpone the vote for a few more months in Autumn 2023 (Kalykov, 2023). This rise in restrictions on civil society space has, moreover, taken place alongside a change in donor priorities and thus less investment in Kyrgyzstan, which has resulted in severe financial difficulties for local NGOs who had become donor dependent (Connery, 2000, p. 11; Pierobon, 2018, p. 124). Outside of governmental pressure on civil society, a rise of illiberalism in Kyrgyz society itself has also taken place (Abdoubayetova, 2023; Ermatov, 2016; Lottholz et al., 2020). Conservative narratives promoting anti-Western sentiment, Kyrgyz traditional values, ethnic identity, and religious dogmas are on the rise among parts of the population, mostly nationalist Kyrgyz-speaking groups⁵ (Abdoubayetova, 2023, p. 282).

One observable trend in this context is the rise, or the revival, of islamisation in Kyrgyzstan (Abdoubayetova, 2023; Biard, 2010; Connery, 2000; Heyat, 2004; Simpson, 2010). Common to the Central Asia region, where Islamisation was completed in the 19th century, cultural islam is central to Kyrgyz society (Connery, 2000, p. 12). During the seventy years of Soviet 'anti-religion' rule in the country, Islam was relegated to a cultural tradition rather than a religious practice (Idem 2000). However, when the USSR collapsed and gave way to what some have called an 'ideological vacuum' (Heyat, 2004), leaders of the newly independent state, in search of cultural authenticity and legitimacy, embraced and re-emphasised Islam as a cornerstone of Kyrgyz national identity construction (Biard, 2010; Connery, 2000).⁶ Already in the early 2000s, it was observed that religious leaders were taking advantage of Kyrgyzstan's political openness to bring forward "fundamentalist⁷, pan-Islamic, and anti-Western" agendas (Connery, 2000, p. 15).

As the rise of civil society, and women's NGOs more particularly, and Islamisation happened in parallel in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, it is important to note that rising religiousness has had implications on the position of women in society. In a context of

⁵ The author argues that the growth of illiberal discourse in Kyrgyzstan is home-grown and not directly influenced by Russian propaganda

⁶ There is however an important geographical divide in regard to religion in Kyrgyzstan, with the north (culturally and geographically closer to Russia) not as strongly connected to Islamic tradition and the south where the population identifies closely with Islam, Sharia law and its traditions (Connery, 2000, p. 13)

⁷ Common to Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan's 'Islamic revival' emphasised an orthodox approach to Islamic ideology and practice, in a process that was associated with the presence of Wahhabism into the region (Heyat, 2004, p. 284)

growing conservative narratives, the gender norms and roles that are currently reinforced in Kyrgyzstan align with traditional and pre-Soviet social and gender relations, namely a patriarchal gender order (Heyat, 2004, p. 286). In 2022, in a statement after a field mission to Kyrgyzstan, the CEDAW noted that the rise of religious extremism is hampering the development of gender equality in the country by “reinforcing discriminatory norms and practices that hold women and girls back from full participation in economic, social and public life” (CEDAW, 2022, p. 1). Finally, the violent repression of the the 8th of March demonstration in 2020, which was marred by the illegal and violent dispersal of activists holding signs against domestic violence and other violations of women’s rights, signalled a “complete breakdown and standstill on women’s issues” in Kyrgyzstan (Sultanalieva, 2023, p. 82).

3. Literature review

In 1974, *Anthropological Quarterly*, a widely read peer-reviewed journal covering issues in social and cultural anthropology, published a special issue on bride kidnapping. Since then, considerable academic research has been published on the practice. Bride kidnapping, although documented all around the world and throughout recorded history, is particularly well-documented in the post-Soviet space, where early Soviet ethnographers observed the practice in many ethnic groups of the region (Borbieva, 2012, p. 142). The ethnic group that has gathered the most scholarship, however, is by far the Kyrgyz people. The practice is in fact nowadays somewhat associated, in academic literature and the physical world, with this Central Asian nation.

This chapter will review the existing literature on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, and as such will largely serve, alongside the previous chapter, as contextualisation for the following analysis. It is important to note here that although the reviewed literature is entirely English-language literature, it does include both Western and Central Asian authors, who at times worked together on publications relating to bride kidnapping. Firstly, the practice will be defined and conceptualised in the Kyrgyz context based on past academic research. Secondly, the gaps in the literature will be outlined to demonstrate how this thesis will insert itself in the existing academic corpus.

3.1 Conceptualisation

Bride kidnapping

A debated definition

Conceptual debates around how to refer to the practice of ‘bride kidnapping’ in Kyrgyzstan and what terminology should be used occupy a large part of the literature on the issue. ‘Bride kidnapping’ has become the English-language translation of the Kyrgyz notion of *Kyz Ala Kachuu*, which literally translates to ‘take and run’ or ‘steal and run’. Simply defined as the abduction of a woman for the purpose of marriage, the practice of *Ala Kachuu* in Kyrgyzstan ranges from consensual eloping to forceful kidnapping and rape (Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013, p. 50). As such, an important distinction is made by many (Western) scholars, since

being first introduced by Amsler and Kleinbach (1999), when setting this practice in the Kyrgyz context, between consensual and non-consensual bride kidnapping. The importance given to terminology in much of the literature can be explained by the influence of feminist studies, which posit that the language we use has framing effects (Werner et al., 2018). In other words, the terms used, for example to describe the abduction of a woman for marriage, can impact the way we look at the act itself, how it is justified or condemned. The Kyrgyz term *Ala Kachuu* is thus confusing as it encompasses the many different forms bride kidnapping can take on, as well illustrated by the following entry in the 2000 *Dictionary of Kyrgyz Ethnography*:

“Kyz ala kachuu—‘Bride kidnapping’—is getting married by abducting a young woman. There are three different kinds of custom: the first kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman without her consent and with the protest of her parents. (...) The second kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman with her consent, but against her parents’ agreement. (...) The third one is the false bride kidnapping, when the parents of both sides agree to the wedding party, but for the avoidance of spending much money, the young man kidnaps his future wife” (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 218).

The second version of bride kidnapping described in the dictionary's definition refers to the Kyrgyz legend of *Ala Kachuu*, often used to explain or justify the practice as an old Kyrgyz tradition. According to this legend, which dates back to the 17th or 18th century, two young people, living by the Bo-hom gorge on the bank of Issyk-Kul lake, were in love and wanted to get married but their parents were against their union. As a result, the young couple jumped off the gorge in protest and died (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 221). According to most scholars who have studied the definitions of bride kidnapping as a practice, this folkloric lore reinforces the notion that *Ala Kachuu*, in its original conceptualisation, implied consent from the future bride. Therefore, many who explore the persistence of this practice in contemporary Kyrgyz society and its impact on women's lives, do not refer to it as *Ala Kachuu* but as non-consensual kidnapping for the purpose of marriage, to stress the coercion element that has come to distort the local legend.

Although the definition of the practice and what can or cannot be labelled ‘bride kidnapping’ remains very much debated among scholars, there is a consensus in the academic literature that individual cases vary greatly, especially in terms of consent, agency and violence in the

kidnapping act. Indeed, the key details of each case play a significant role in determining the nature of the kidnapping and how it can therefore, case by case, be conceptualised. Werner et al. (2018) identify the following key details:

“The prior relationship between the abductor and the woman, the motives behind the kidnapping, the extent to which the woman consents to the marriage before the abduction, the extent to which both families are involved in the kidnapping, whether or not there are male and/or female co-conspirators, the use of deception and force in the act of abduction, the amount of resistance from the woman, and the ultimate outcome of the kidnapping.” (Werner et al., 2018, pp. 582–583).

Regarding the outcome of the kidnapping, research has demonstrated that most women eventually agree, although under duress, to the marriage after their abduction. Cynthia Werner argued that this result is due to the shame doing otherwise would bring upon the woman and her family (Werner, 2009; Werner et al., 2018). This argument has been reinforced since by many scholars studying issues of gender in Central Asia. Most recently, H el ene Thibault and Jean-Fran ois Caron asserted that shame, known in the Turkic languages of the region as *uyat*, remains “a powerful regulatory mechanism constraining Central Asian individuals’ behaviours and encouraging them to conform to dominant social norms” (2022).

In this thesis, for sake of simplicity, the term bride kidnapping will be used throughout to designate the first version of the practice described in the Kyrgyz dictionary, namely non-consensual kidnapping of a woman for the purpose of forced marriage.

An old Kyrgyz tradition?

Second to the attention devoted to the terminology of bride kidnapping in the literature is the focus on researching whether or not it is a practice revived from the past and whether it has increased in frequency in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. As such, the debate can be divided around three main time periods: the pre-Soviet era (until the 1920s), the Soviet era (1920s-1991), and the post-Soviet era (1991-present).

According to numerous scholars, marriages in pre-Soviet Central Asia were arranged by parents and little consideration was given to the couple’s consent (Kleinbach & Babaiarova,

2013; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Nalivkin & Nalivkina, 2016). Bride kidnapping was thus a practice used by a young man and his family when the parents of the young woman did not agree to the union or when a couple was in love and both families were against the marriage. The practice could also take place when families, given the high cost of weddings in a society where such ceremonies are seen as an opportunity to demonstrate social status, wanted to lower their expenses. However, a number of researchers, including Saul Abramzon, a twentieth century Russian ethnographer specialised in Kyrgyzstan, have argued that bride kidnapping as a marriage practice was a rarity in pre-Soviet times. According to him, this was mainly due to the conflicts among the large circle of relatives on both sides and the tribal hostility the kidnapping would lead to, which would most often end in very severe consequences (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 221). As women were seen as property and labour to be exchanged between families, bride theft was severely punished, up to the death penalty, as was theft of other forms of property (Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013, p. 52). To this, Kleinbach and Salimjanova further posit that non-consensual kidnapping was in opposition to Kyrgyz *adat*, traditional customary law, and Islamic law, which could also explain the low frequency of the practice (2007, p. 220). Regarding the status of non-consensual *Ala Kachuu* as a Kyrgyz tradition, the two authors also found that the practice is absent from the Manas Epic, the Kyrgyz epic poem that holds the status of scripture and has come to embody Kyrgyz traditions. This does not mean that the practice did not take place, but it can be seen as evidence that non-consensual bride kidnapping was not socially approved as a tradition in pre-Soviet times (2007, p. 225).

While the 19th century and the Russian Imperial era did bring some legal changes to Central Asia, it was the Soviets, inspired by Marxist ideology, who in the 20th century attempted to instigate the biggest transformations to the region. Bearing in mind the colonial undertone and the questionable feminism⁸ of Soviet policies aimed at the emancipation and empowerment of women in Central Asia, in the 1920s the Soviet leadership banned forced marriage among other marriage practices. These reforms were part of the USSR's desire to eradicate what it considered to be the "patriarchal-feudal stage of social evolution" (Werner, 2022, p. 462). It is, however, difficult to estimate how effective such reforms were. Although

⁸ For more on the colonial and gender elements of Soviet policy in Central Asia, refer to: Gradszkova, Y. (2018). Emancipation at the Crossroad between the 'Woman Question' and the 'National Question'. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union* (pp. 117–131). Palgrave Macmillan.
Gradszkova, Y. (2019). *Soviet Politics of Emancipation of Ethnic Minority Woman: Natsionalka*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99199-3>

the literature is rich on the early Soviet decades of the 1920s and 1930s (Gradskova, 2022; Kamp, 2008; Northrop, 2004) and the post-Soviet era, there is little research on the middle and late Soviet periods (Werner, 2022, p. 464). In the few studies conducted on the issue of frequency and nature of bride kidnapping in the Kyrgyz SSR, scholars seem to agree that the Soviet laws did not prevent the practice from taking place (Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013; Werner, 2022). Ethnographic research has, moreover, found that during this period the previously rare consensual *Ala Kachuu* became more prevalent (Ibid). Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) explained this rise in frequency as a result of the increasing socio-economic status of women and, therefore, their lessened willingness to accept early or arranged marriages by their parents. Thus, consensual bride kidnapping increased as young couples found it to be the solution to their new desire of freedom of choice in partners. The same scholars, however, add that as consensual *Ala Kachuu* became more frequent, so did the practice of non-consensual bride kidnapping by some men and their families, eventually leading to the kidnapping act being increasingly accepted and deemed legitimate, although always being illegal (2007, p. 230). According to several authors, non-consensual bride kidnapping is therefore not a pre-Soviet Kyrgyz tradition, but a “Soviet era fashion” and an “invented tradition” to counter-Soviet gender policies (Jacquesson, 2022, p. 351; Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013, pp. 53–55).

Finally, the core of the debate in the literature on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan revolves around the post-1991 era. Two main areas of focus can be discerned, namely the questioned persistence of bride kidnapping in the independence period and, if so, the uncovering of the factors explaining the continued use of this practice in contemporary Kyrgyz society. Due to the lack of national data regarding how Kyrgyz people get married, however, the first area of study has proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, most studies have revealed that bride kidnapping experienced a revival since 1991 and has in fact increased in frequency since the fall of the Soviet Union (Amsler & Kleinbach, 1999; Beyer & Finke, 2019; Kleinbach, 2003; Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Werner, 2009; Werner et al., 2018). One study by Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian (2016) stands out in the literature by arguing that non-consensual bride kidnapping notably decreased in frequency after 2000. In contrast to most other research demonstrating a consolidation of traditional marriage practices in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, these scholars posit that marriage dynamics have changed significantly. They argue that a modernisation of society, propelled by the fall of the Soviet Union, has led to the retreating importance of marriage in society, the postponement of

marriages and the spread of non-marital cohabitation (2016, p. 862). This study, nonetheless, remains isolated in the literature.

As it is mostly agreed upon that the practice of bride kidnapping remains observable today in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, especially in its non-consensual form, the second area of study, that of exploring the causes for the persistence and/or revival of bride kidnapping has received much more attention. Here again, two main factors compete in the literature: the economic arguments and the socio-cultural arguments.

Regarding the economic factors explaining the continued recourse to bride kidnapping as a marriage practice, many scholars reference the difficult economic situation Kyrgyzstan has experienced since gaining independence in the 1990s (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Borbieva, 2012; Werner et al., 2018). They posit that high unemployment and rising poverty have impacted families' socioeconomic status and, therefore, weakened their ability to afford wedding expenses. According to those in favour of the economic argument, this context has led to bride kidnapping becoming increasingly seen as a more affordable way to seal a union between two families. One scholar even argued that men who resort to kidnapping are often previously rejected due to their low financial status (Edling in Werner et al., 2018). The practice of bride kidnapping, in effect, by preventing the woman's family from participating cuts the attendance, and therefore the costs, in half. This argument, however, in its association with a more consensual and pragmatic version of bride kidnapping, does not explain the rise of non-consensual, violent, and sometimes deadly, abduction. This is why the existing literature on the persistence of this practice in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is heavily devoted to the socio-cultural argument. In this, the notion of retraditionalisation has become central.

Retraditionalisation

It is in the context of an unprepared transition from the Soviet Union to independence, what Lori Handrahan called a "forced independence" (2001, p. 481), that scholars have introduced the concept of retraditionalisation in the literature on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Jacquesson, 2022). Like the name suggests, this concept emanates from the notion of tradition, a term that has been heavily researched, debated and applied to various academic fields of study. One generally agreed upon idea in the literature on tradition, defined as the transmission of customs or beliefs from one generation to the next as well as

the process of handing down, is that it is fluid and prone to change (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314; Jacquesson, 2022, p. 349). In 1983, Hobsbawm and Ranger famously coincide the concept of ‘invented traditions’, arguing that traditions often appear to be authentic and long-established when they are in fact relatively recent and artificially created (1983). Therefore, periods of transition, such as the one experienced by Kyrgyzstan post-1991, are most often times where the meaning of tradition is contested and renegotiated between actors. Svetlana Jacquesson identifies four main actors of tradition: the scholars defining and redefining tradition as a concept, the cultural elites claiming custody of traditions, the politicians attempting to harness them, and the people carrying them on (2022, p. 349). One outcome of contestation, renegotiation, and change, especially in a context of transition and uncertainty, is the reinforcement of the value given to tradition, leading to retraditionalisation. According to Mould, traditionalisation results from a practice being communally recognised as traditional and can be defined as a process of sense-making by the actors themselves - to themselves and to one another (2005). Moreover, Beyer and Finke view traditionalisation as the “institutionalisation of social practice, informed by - and, in turn, informing - cultural models” (2019, p. 313). Cleuziou adds to this that traditionalisation should be conceptualised as a “performance where people, ideas, values and norms interact at a given moment, according to a certain order, and are collectively acknowledged as valuable and traditional” (2019, p. 348). Retraditionalisation can thus be understood as the revival of practices commonly recognised as ‘traditional’.

The revival of practices deemed traditional in the post-1991 period by cultural elites and politicians in Central Asia, here bride kidnapping, has received much attention by scholars of the region. Authors have found that as newly independent states, the regimes of Central Asia instrumentalised tradition in their attempts to create a new national identity and foster a sense of belonging in the post-Soviet era (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Gullette, 2010; Jacquesson, 2022; March, 2003; Werner, 2009). In this age of return to tradition, tribal and other norms, which had preceded both the Russian and Soviet periods and had been repressed under these regimes, experienced a resurgence (L. M. Handrahan, 2001). Moreover, for governments in quest of a new and solidified national identity, tradition is a crucial element. It implies a link between the past and the present, which serves as a tool to legitimise regimes by emphasising continuity of practices, and is commonly deemed a ‘weapon of the strong’ (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 322). Interestingly, scholars have pointed to a paradox of tradition in this process. Just as Central Asian regimes promote national identity as both “the most ancient and the most modern form of belonging” in order to authenticate their power,

tradition exists within a paradox of juxtaposition to modernity on the one hand and alignment with nationalism of the other (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Jacquesson, 2022, p. 357). Tradition as being in opposition to modernity was clearly visible during the Soviet times, as previously explained, when the authorities set off to eradicate tradition in order to become the modern homo Sovieticus people. In the post-independence era, authorities aligned tradition with their nation-building initiatives and upheld retraditionalisation of society in order to promote new forms of sense-making, which in turn allowed the regime to set tradition as “a marker of identity and political reconstruction” (Beyer & Finke, 2019). Within this process, scholars have also pointed to the promotion of tradition as a marker of national identity as a backlash against the increasing presence of Western discourse and lifestyles in Central Asia (Werner, 2009, p. 328).

Overall, whether something to be eradicated for modernisation purposes or something to be strengthened for national identity construction, tradition is undoubtedly a central element of periods of transition and reconstruction. In addition, during times of retraditionalisation few issues generate more discussion than gender. The latter has, indeed, been recognised in the literature not only as one of the main axes around which politics, economics and societies are organised, but also as a place where significant debates on tradition arise in society (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Fabian, Johnson, et al., 2022; Peshkova, 2022a, 2022b).

Drawing from the extensive and rich literature on the impact of social, economic and political transition on women in the world, numerous scholars studying the phenomenon of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan have pointed to the gender element of retraditionalisation to explain the persistence of this practice in contemporary society (Fabian, Johnson, et al., 2022; L. M. Handrahan, 2001; Hoare, 2016; Peshkova, 2022a, 2022b; Werner et al., 2018).

First of all, gender and feminist studies define gender as the socio-cultural construction of what is meant by male or female, the norms and values that are socially associated with these notions. It is important to note here that as a concept developed in 1960s and onwards in American and European academic contexts, the term gender is not indigenous to Central Asia and it is, therefore, not widely adopted by the local populations. It is, in fact, mostly restricted to the fields of international aid and non-governmental activism (Peshkova, 2022b, p. 362). Nevertheless, academics, mostly Western but increasingly local scholars too, have deemed that looking at Central Asian phenomena through a gender lens

allows for a more nuanced understanding of the human experience in the region (Hoare, 2016; Peshkova, 2022b).

Secondly, an increase in violence against women, here that of non-consensual bride kidnapping, can be seen as indicative of unrest in society, such as that observable during periods of socio-economic and political transformation (L. M. Handrahan, 2001, p. 480). As gender relations and definitions find themselves the centre of a national identity crisis, women are often greatly impacted by transitions. In the process of retraditionalisation of Kyrgyz society authors have found that, as in all Central Asian countries, the government redefined gender roles, norms and rights, to align with their nation-building initiatives (Fabian, Johnson, et al., 2022; L. Handrahan, 2004; L. M. Handrahan, 2001; Peshkova, 2022a, 2022b). This is to say that the government, in search of a new national identity, appealed to national ideology and the myths of origin, which are founded upon a strict gender order that ostracises women and results in exclusionary male ideology, in its selective revival of customs and ‘traditional’ practices (L. M. Handrahan, 2001, p. 481). In a patriarchal society such as Kyrgyzstan, the gender order relies on essential gender ideology which stresses the importance of norms and values such as honour, shame, and respectability as the moral markers of gender roles, which in turn inform behaviour (Peshkova, 2022b, p. 371). In Kyrgyzstan, socially imbued notions of obedience and respect for elders are additional pressures on women, especially for kidnapped brides (Werner et al., 2018, p. 590). The process of retraditionalisation has thus resulted in the strengthening of importance on marriage, which includes bringing in a daughter-in-law to help in the running of the household and family. Maintaining the family’s honour also implies not being sexually active until marriage, remaining loyal to the husband and not instigating divorce, irrespective of how abusive the marriage may be (Dzardanova & Uralova, 2022, pp. 3–4). This combined with the strengthened belief that tradition is more important than religious or civil law has been argued to be one of the main driving forces for the persistence of bride kidnapping (Kleinbach & Babaiarova, 2013, p. 59). Moreover, the notion of patriarchy is important and debated. Some scholars have advanced that the reinforcement of patriarchy contributed to the revival and persistence of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan (Cleuziou & Drenberger, 2016; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Werner, 2009; Werner et al., 2018), while others reject this argument by stressing the role of women in reinforcing and normalising the practice (Borbieva, 2012). Finally, returning to the definition of traditionalisation as a performance of values and norms, the practice of bride kidnapping has been argued to be a performed tradition in contemporary Kyrgyzstan to ensure social continuity and collective identity

(Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016; Jacquesson, 2022). In a quite radical view, Handrahan argued that the revival of bride kidnapping became an affirmation of Kyrgyz male ethnic identity, one that must be performed to be a true Kyrgyz man (2004).

Overall, retraditionalisation and gender are intrinsically linked, and it is argued in the literature that the persistence of bride kidnapping in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is a product of this so-called gendered retraditionalisation.

3.2 Gaps in the literature

Given the nexus of transition, retraditionalisation and gender exposed by the literature, it is clear that practices deemed traditional are deeply gendered and that they can be instrumentalised in periods of transformation. What is visible in the existing research is the focus on retraditionalisation and its impact on gender from a top-down perspective. Indeed, this thesis inserts itself in Beyer and Finke's 2019 observation that "the last 30 years scholarship has focused on elites and intellectuals whose role it was to codify the kind of tradition that should represent and embody nation" (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 311) and that much less research has been dedicated to how tradition is 'done', namely how it is enacted, enforced and motivated (2019, p. 312). Moreover, even fewer studies have been devoted to how tradition is challenged. In the case of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, a small number of academic writings point to the areas and actors of potential challenge by arguing that retraditionalisation is never unchallenged and requires resistance and renegotiation (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Jacquesson, 2022; Werner, 2009). Additionally, a 2018 roundtable discussion gathering seven experts on the topic found that local actors are increasingly questioning the acceptability of bride kidnapping, including feminist activists and specific government officials working on legal amendments (Werner et al., 2018, p. 584). The researchers also briefly mentioned awareness raising campaigns led by activists and journalists to end the perception of bride kidnapping as a private family affair, and to break the silence and shame around this practice. One scholar notably identified parents as a site of intervention for such campaigns (Teachout 2018, p. 596). The exception to this gap in literature is Kleinbach and Babairova's 2013 study on the results of one anti-kidnapping project. The 'Anti-Kidnapping Educational Program', led by local anti-kidnapping activist, first took place in 2008-2009 in rural Kyrgyzstan and again in 2011-2012 in Karakol city, and aimed to change societal attitudes regarding bride kidnapping by providing educational awareness raising campaigns

to target audiences. The authors found that the methods used by the project, namely the principle of “truth force” that emphasised reason, evidence and experienced-based explanations as to why bride kidnapping is harmful, were successful in reducing the practice in the observed areas one year later (2013, p. 54). Nevertheless, this study is isolated in its focus on concrete challenges to bride kidnapping as a case of gendered retraditionalisation.

Regarding the specific role that NGOs hold in the process of challenging bride kidnapping as a Kyrgyz tradition, again a small number of authors briefly point to the social and political worth of such organisations (Beyer & Finke, 2019; L. M. Handrahan, 2001; Werner, 2009; Werner et al., 2018). As mentioned in the context chapter, Cynthia Werner, notably, argued that civil society, and NGOs especially, have taken over the state's role in Kyrgyzstan as ‘defender of women’s rights’ (Werner, 2009, p. 328). This statement is also clearly visible outside of academic literature in reports and articles by journalists and organisations working on this issue (Dzardanova & Uralova, 2022, p. 4; Mondello, 2021; Mukhamejan, 2022). Nevertheless, the role and impact that local NGOs can have in contributing to the fight against harmful gendered retraditionalisation is yet to be fully explored in academia.

Overall, this literature review demonstrates that bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan remains a heavily debated and complex issue, whether in regards to the employed terminology, the very occurrence of the practice in pre-Soviet times, its status as an ancient tradition, its revival in the independence era, and its explaining factors in contemporary society. It has, moreover, demonstrated that the scope of study on bride kidnapping is still mostly restricted to viewing the persistence of this issue as a top-down process, where tradition is imposed by those in power. This thesis will thus insert itself in the literature on bride kidnapping, within the field of gender retraditionalisation, in two ways. Firstly by taking a bottom-up approach to the issue by following the more scarce literature positing that the perseverance of bride kidnapping, as a result of retraditionalisation, is a societal and political issue that is not purely dictated by the political elites but also informed by societal attitudes and narratives, processes that are constantly contested and subject to change. Secondly, and this will be the prime focus of this study, by examining the position and engagement of underrepresented actors in the academic scholarship on bride kidnapping, women’s NGOs.

4. Theoretical framework

“We depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe. Air keeps us alive; stories give meaning to our lives” (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 286)

As outlined in the previous chapter, the literature on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan is poor in studies on challenges to this practice. While examining the narratives that inform this phenomenon is more common, few studies have been conducted on the ways in which it can be challenged and social change, especially in regards to the situation of women in the country, can arise. Aiming to contribute to research on the challenges to this practice, this thesis is framed around counter-narrative theory. This chapter will outline the core components of this theory, which will be relevant for the following analysis of the collected data.

Counter-narrative theory

It should be noted at the outset that counter-narrative theory is a developing field within the broader, and better established, field of narrative research and theory.

The development of narrative theory occurred during the postwar rise of humanist approaches within Western psychology and sociology, which countered positivist empiricism by introducing more holistic and person-centred ways of thinking (Squire et al., 2013, p. 3). This development was further accentuated in the 1970s by what has been referred to as the ‘narrative turn’ in the humanities brought forward by the post-structuralist and post-modern movements, embodied by philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault, and their acknowledgment of the omnipresence of ‘narrative’ in society and culture (Erll in Herman et al., 2005, p. 151). In these movements therefore, narratives are no longer attached to literary genres or textual materials but are conceptualised as a phenomenon transcending text and concerned with social and collective life, in other words narratives are rendered an integral part of the human experience (Morrisson in Herman et al., 2005, p. 708).

Despite the fact that narrative theory is a well established framework in academic research, there is little consensus in the literature on the definition of the central term “narrative”. Deriving from the latin adjective *gnārus*, meaning to know or to have knowledge, narrative is most often associated with situated knowledge, namely knowledge that is embedded in, and

thus impacted by, the historical, cultural and value context of the knowing person or group (Haraway, 1988). Within this paradigm, narratives are inseparable from the context within which they originate (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 287; Lueg et al., 2022, p. 72). Furthermore, terms such as ‘scripts’, ‘frames’, ‘story’ and ‘discourse’ can be seen used synonymously to narrative (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Morrisson in Herman et al., 2005; Hyvarinen, 2021; Lueg et al., 2022; Squire et al., 2013). Here, without diving into the complex philosophical field that revolves around this concept, it is this important to dissociate the notion of discourse from narrative. If discourse can be simply defined as the “language and meaning [used by individuals or groups] to enact activities, perspectives, and identities” (Gee, 1999, p. 4), then narrative shaped by its social and historical context, can be defined as “any account of an event or experience drawing on discourses that have cultural currency” (Fage-Butler, 2021, p. 86).

Moreover, narrative theory is far from being straight-forward and comprises numerous approaches. Scholars have conducted studies ranging from research on individual thinking or feeling as narrative to research concerned with the social production of narratives by their audiences, or more broadly with how narratives “follow, are constrained by, or resist, larger social patterns of social and cultural storytelling”, the latter being the approach this study takes (Squire et al., 2013, p. 6). On top of this plurality of research between individually or socially-oriented studies, narrative research is also divided between event or experience-centred research, as well as around the level of interest granted to the notion of *agency* within narrative, with works focused on individuals and personal experiences demonstrating more connections between agency and narrative. Nonetheless, studies concerned with broader social and cultural notions of narrative have also shown interest in agency, notably by positing, following a broadly humanist argument, that individuals and collectives have the potential to bring about change in society (Ibid, 2013, p. 7). This idea of transformation is, in fact, central to counter-narrative research and will be further developed later.

Despite these debates on definition and theoretical applications, there are some agreed-upon characteristics of narrative theory. The main one being that narratives are models of sense making for individuals, as well as societal groups (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021; Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Herman et al., 2005; Lueg et al., 2022; Müller & Frandsen, 2021). Similarly to numerous authors, Marie-Laure Ryan finds that narratives are not only a tool to construct reality but that they “create and transmit cultural traditions, and build the values and beliefs

that define cultural identities” (Ryan in Herman et al., 2005, p. 471). The connection drawn between narrative and identity exposes another central element of narrative theory, namely the notion of performativity (Butler, 1993). Narratives are performative as they are not only informed by the social context, but in turn also shape the normatively laden social order by constantly perpetuating social beliefs and structures (Meretoja, 2021, p. 32). As narrative agents, citizens of a given society perform narratives by carrying out the norms, beliefs, behaviours, and expectations associated with them. As such, Bochner and Herrman’s view that identity is “continuously under narrative construction” demonstrates that narratives produce identities in a process that is constantly subject to change (2020, p. 287).

Overall, narrative research is an interdisciplinary and wide field rich of various approaches and interpretations. By focusing on narratives, scholars are able to uncover how social structures vary or persist over time, as well as investigate who produces them and how, how narratives are accepted, contested or silenced, and by whom, and what impact, if any, this has on a given society or group. Narrative theory is thus the suited broader theoretical field for the study of narratives around bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, a phenomenon that inscribes itself in a particular society and that carries meaning within this context that it would not elsewhere.

A more recent expansion in the theory is the development of counter-narratives as a theoretical framework of its own. Importantly, the notion of counter-narrative supposes the pre-existence of a narrative, hereafter a master-narrative (Fage-Butler, 2021, p. 86) . As the literature and examples from the ‘real-world’ suggest, narratives can be either socially upheld, and are therefore qualified as master-narratives, or contested, and known as counter-narratives. Narratives thus have the potential to both “reproduce or challenge existing relations of power and equity” (Lueg et al., 2022, p. 3).

The term master-narrative, originally coined ‘grand-récit’ or ‘metanarrative’ (Lyotard, 1979), most often refers to pre-existent socio-cultural forms of interpretation, in other words a model of sense-making reflective of narratives deeply embedded in a specific culture (Bamberg in Herman et al., 2005, p. 401; Hyvarinen, 2021, pp. 19–20). As such, master-narratives, also seen as canonical stories, can be defined as the dominant discourse in a given society (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 287; Hyvarinen, 2021, pp. 19–20). Again, for sake of simplicity, this thesis will follow the lead of Michael Bamberg, key figure in narrative theory and inquiry practice, in equating ‘master-narrative’ with Paul Gee’s ‘capital-D discourse’ (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021; Gee, 1999). As such, master-narratives are characterised

as ‘normalising’ or ‘naturalising’ beliefs, norms, behaviours or events, thus making this model the ‘standard’(Hyvarinen, 2021, p. 20). These projections of normality and the mainstreaming effect of master-narratives tend to have an impact on how individuals perceive and position themselves within a group, community, or society (Fage-Butler, 2021, p. 86). Further describing the centrality of master-narratives in society and the human experience, Bochner and Herrman coined the notion of ‘narrative inheritance’, namely the process by which narratives are passed on through generations and serve as a guide to individuals on “who we are; where we are located in ethnic, family, racial, sexual, and cultural history; where we have come from; where we may be going; what we can say and do; and with whom” (2020, p. 287). In their vision, this can serve to explain why master-narratives tend to be so resistant to change (Idem 2020). Therefore, in many contexts master-narratives are a vehicle of dominant ideology and an instrument of power, which constitute a central part in maintaining the normatively laden social order as it is (Ryan in Herman et al., 2005, p. 471).

Against this background, counter-narratives, first introduced in the early 1990s, can thus be defined as the discourses opposing those socially powerful and dominant master-narratives (Fage-Butler, 2021, p. 86; Meretoja, 2021, p. 32). In the more recent growth of attention to counter-narratives within narrative theory, three main theoretical features can be outlined: 1) the focus on deconstructing the master-narrative; 2) the emphasis on social impact, transformation, and change; and 3) the focus on marginalised and/or oppressed groups.

Firstly, as outlined in the definition above, counter-narratives are characterised by their critical perspective on dominant narratives (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021; Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Fage-Butler, 2021; Hyvarinen, 2021; Meretoja, 2021; Vaara et al., 2016). Following a poststructural approach to narrative, counter-narratives move beyond passive criticism and tend to take on a stronger element best described by Fage-Butler: “the *raison d’être* of counter-narratives can (...) be considered to be individual and collective resistance” (2021, p. 87). In other words, counter-narratives are centred around the deconstruction of master-narratives. Set in the academic context of a need for new analytical perspectives on larger narratives, focusing on counter-narratives allows scholars to observe how they play a role in storytellers’ positioning against and criticism of the themes and ideologies of master-narratives (Hyvarinen, 2021, p. 17). Indeed, according to Matti Hyvärinen, a counter-narrative theoretical approach consistently sets the stories within a “larger narrative contest” (Idem 2021, p. 17). In this way, counter-narratives are also fundamentally concerned with the notion of power relations between groups. This contestation, in an attempt to fight

unbalanced and prejudiced power dynamics, can be undertaken at all levels of society, by individuals or groups, with the latter obviously allowing for broader impact. Contestation, moreover, is argued to grant agency to those social actors (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 292).

Secondly, counter-narratives have been theorised as being uniquely distinguished by their ambition of transformation. Bamberg and Wipff argue that by attempting to transform background assumptions, most often those supporting master-narratives, counter-narratives have, as poststructural analytical approaches to cultural critique and change, yet untapped potential in the study of social change (2021, p. 73). They are thus interpreted as “innovative and creative forces fostering societal change” and “holding productive potential for progress, development, and ethical issues such as justice” (Lueg et al., 2022, p. 4). Overall, the goal of counter-narratives is, therefore, to raise awareness and consciousness to specific issues, promote empathy and social justice by starting and maintaining conversations, as well as encouraging activism (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 290). In regards to the ability of individuals or groups to achieve their stated goals, Bamberg importantly notes the relevance of the issue of resources at the disposal of those desiring change to draw up strategies contributing and eventually leading to transformation (In Herman et al., 2005, p. 401).

Thirdly, and finally, the concept of counter-narratives was first used with a predominant focus on minority groups who resisted hegemonic ideologies in which they were being oppressed, silenced, and rendered invisible (Meretoja, 2021; Müller & Frandsen, 2021). In the subsequent development of counter-narrative theory, this element has remained central. By granting a form of agency to those who feel misrepresented in master-narratives and helping them break the silence on perceived discriminatory practices and representations, counter-narratives empower weaker and voiceless groups to refuse the identities, encompassing various norms, beliefs, and behaviours, imposed onto them and to re-identify themselves in more worthy terms (Fage-Butler, 2021; Hyvarinen, 2021; Nelson, 2001). Counter-narratives are thus concerned with fostering well being for vulnerable groups and can be considered a purposeful attempt at transforming the meaning attached to an individual or group’s social identity by dislodging the oppressive qualities of dominant narratives (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 314). Meretoja has notably named this process a ‘(re)-negotiation of narrative identities’ (Meretoja, 2021, p. 30). Reflecting the concerns of the non-mainstream, also known as the ‘subaltern’, counter-narratives, moreover, emanate from subjugated knowledge. A concept broadly developed by Michel Foucault, subjugated knowledge relates to knowledge and experience held by and unique to minority groups in a

given society (Foucault, 1980). According to Foucauldian theory, this knowledge has been “disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” and that it is, relating to the first characteristic of counter-narrative theory, through this type of knowledge that “criticism performs its work” (1980, p. 82). In the case of this research, the subjugated knowledge at hand is the women of Kyrgyzstan’s lived experience of bride kidnapping, knowledge thus related to the social and gender order in the country.

As demonstrated, counter-narrative theory, as a growing field in social research, is a well-suited approach for the object of this thesis’ research. Indeed, narrative theory, within a poststructuralist approach to narrative, is well applicable to the study of cultural and societal phenomenons (Hyvarinen, 2021; Vaara et al., 2016). The concepts of master and counter-narratives not only allow for the naming and categorisation of how individuals and/or social groups position their sense-making process vis-à-vis each other, but also to observe and reveal how narrative meanings are transformed through social negotiations (Lueg et al., 2022).

5. Methodology and methods

In line with the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, this study takes on (counter-)narrative inquiry as its methodological approach. The latter will be supported by a feminist analytical framework. The components of these two approaches will be described in this chapter, as well as how they are complementary for the purpose of this research. Case and data selection, as well as the stated limitations of the study, will also be outlined, thus setting the ground for the following presentation of findings, and their subsequent interpretation.

(Counter-)narrative inquiry

Since the 1990s, narrative research, as a form of qualitative and interpretive study, has grown in popularity in social science research (Squire et al., 2013, p. 1). Narrative inquiry, also found as narrative analysis, is the logical accompanying methodology to (counter-)narrative theory. In line with this, in 1997 Michael Bamberg, a key figure in narrative inquiry scholarship, framed the practice as being able to investigate how individuals negotiate their social actions, positionings, and identity by looking at the stories they bring forward (1997). More recently, editing authors of the *Routledge Handbook on Counter-Narratives*, Lueg et al, described narrative inquiry as a tool researching “what people do with narratives, as well as how [they] impact people” (2022, p. 3). Here an important distinction between research *with* narratives, in which narratives are “the tools to explore something else-- typically aspects of human memory or experience”, and research *on* narratives, where narratives are the object of the study, must be made, with this thesis taking the form of the latter (Bamberg, 2012, p. 87). Within this approach, narratives, as objects to be deconstructed, become the data and are put under analysis (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 302). In this practice, furthermore, it is the “how and for whom of narrative telling” that must be highlighted (Idem, 2020, p. 303). An important element in narrative inquiry, which includes counter-narratives, resonating with the theoretical components outlined above, is that it contains “theories about how human experience works” (Lueg et al., 2022, p. 5). In other words, as within all qualitative research approaches, contextualising the data is key as human experiences differ based on factors

ranging from location to identity. Narrative inquiry is, moreover, a fitted tool to study social phenomena (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 303), here that of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan.

Case selection

To undertake the narrative inquiry set out in this thesis and achieve its goals, namely to reveal what people do with narratives, for whom they are told and how, a group engaged in this issue must be selected for the analysis. The chosen case study for this research is a selection of local Kyrgyz NGOs. The focus on this group is fuelled by the fact that, not only NGOs in themselves are underexplored actors in societal and narrative change, but also that such organisations collect and produce vast amounts of data, most often underused for research purposes (Masefield et al., 2020, p. 1). Analysis of NGO data is therefore an opportunity to provide new insights in the field of study. What is more, focusing on NGOs allows me to alleviate a number of research limitations that will be elaborated on in more depth below.

Starting in September 2022, the selection of NGOs was first done through internet research of organisations and their work online, through an in-depth screening of available websites and social media accounts of potential respondents. This selection process was furthered by an initial familiarisation visit to Bishkek in November 2022 and a meeting with a local NGO consultant working on gender issues who was able to recommend more organisations working on bride kidnapping. Subsequently, the final sample selection of NGOs was done during the field research in February and March 2023 in Bishkek. During this field research period, despite initial difficulties in getting responses to invitation emails, once the local context of communication, namely Whatsapp or Telegram messaging and person to person contact, was understood and taken on board, a snowball effect of respondents passing the word to colleagues eventually enabled me to reach out, meet and invite more potential NGO respondents to take part in the study.

The seven selected NGOs are organisations that are either entirely dedicated to the issue of bride kidnapping, or that have at least one programme or projects relating to this phenomenon. The selected organisations are groups dedicated to work on women's issues and therefore are considered 'women's NGOs'. All participants in this study, moreover, are women, residents of Bishkek, with a relatively high level of education. Additionally, in regards to the subjugated knowledge of the respondents, although none have experienced

bride-kidnapping themselves, and are therefore removed from it, all shared first or second-hand experiences of this practice from their entourage, as well as the acknowledged risk, as women, to be one day subjected to abduction.

The selected sample group all consist of Bishkek-based women's NGOs. This restricted group is justified by the fact that rural-based NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are in large part crisis centres and shelters, registered as NGOs, undertaking emergency response work as opposed to more project-based and awareness raising work, which fit the purpose and objectives of this research better. The work of Bishkek-based women's NGOs is, however, also implemented in the regions of the country and therefore carries a multi-level impact-range allowing this study to qualify its scope as broader than simply the capital.

In total, the group sample consists of seven Bishkek-based women's NGOs. More specifically, the group comprises four project-based NGOs, including one entirely dedicated to the issue of bride kidnapping; one media NGO closely covering the issue, notably through broader research projects on bride kidnapping; and two crisis centres based in the capital, which were included despite the above-mentioned limitations in their work in order to, nevertheless, include accounts of the impact of bride-kidnapping practices and allow for a broader understanding of the context of other project-based organisations, relevant for the analysis and interpretation. According to my research and what respondents let me know, these seven organisations are well representative of women's NGOs working on bride kidnapping in Bishkek, and consist of the main organisations on this issue in the capital. There was only one NGO that I had deemed relevant that I could not reach.

Method and data collection

The methodological toolbox of narrative inquiry is broad and contested. Unlike other interpretative research approaches, narrative inquiry offers no defined methods or rules regarding suitable modes of investigation (Squire et al., 2013, p. 1). Within this freedom of choice, interviews were deemed the most appropriate and beneficial mode of investigation for this study. Indeed, the amount and quality of materials available on the website of NGOs was extremely varied, and oftentimes limited, thus not allowing for an in-depth understanding of the goals, scope, and, most importantly, positioning of organisations vis-à-vis existing

narratives on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. Interviews, therefore, offer the possibility to have NGO representatives speak at length on their work and express their view on the issue studied. This was especially necessary as previously stated not all selected NGOs are entirely dedicated to the issue of bride kidnapping and therefore have little documentation available online.

The conducted interviews can be qualified as semi-structured interviews. Defined as interviews with the purpose of “obtaining descriptions of the life world [here work] of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann, 2020, p. 438), they are the most common form of interviews in social research. Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured ones offer more leeway regarding follow-up questions, and compared to unstructured interviews, they allow for greater say by the researcher in focusing the conversation on issues relevant to the study focus and objectives (Idem 2020). They were thus deemed the most appropriate way of producing knowledge on the research issue. In line with a semi-structured interview approach, the questions posed were descriptive oriented and invited NGO interviewees to reflect on how they frame and conceptualise bride kidnapping in their country, from an organisational point of view, and how this is reflected in their work.

In total, 11 interviews were conducted during the field research in February and March 2023 and nine were retained for the data sample. Firstly, one interview was conducted with each of the seven selected women’s NGOs, with the exception of one organisation where two interviews were conducted: one with a representative of the NGO and the other with a consultant responsible for the design of a bride kidnapping-specific game for this organisation. Secondly, an additional interview was conducted with a freelance gender expert very often working as a consultant for women’s NGOs on bride kidnapping projects and activities, and was interviewed in this capacity. Finally, two interviews were conducted and then disregarded in the data selection process. One interview was disregarded because the NGO had accepted the invitation but turned out not to engage in any bride kidnapping specific work. Although this meeting offered interesting insight into gender and human rights issues more broadly, it was not deemed relevant to this research. A second interview was disregarded because it was with an intergovernmental organisation, and not an NGO. The original project included having insight from intergovernmental organisations, such as UN agencies, on their assessments of local NGOs’ work on bride kidnapping. As this proved very difficult to obtain, thus reducing the reliability of this aspect, this idea was eventually deemed outside of the scope of this research and the only interview secured was disregarded.

The interviews were prepared in advance and divided into two parts. The first part was composed of general questions posed to all participants, aiming to reveal their positioning and their narratives on bride kidnapping, and how this is reflected in their work (see questions in Appendix 2.). The second part was composed of NGO-specific questions, based on research into their individual activities. They took place face-to-face (lasting on average one hour), either at NGO offices or in the location of choice of interviewees, most often cafes, and were mostly conducted in Russian with help from an interpreter. Only one out of nine selected interviews was conducted in English.

Analytical strategies

Just as narrative inquiry does not require specific modes of investigations, it does not either offer clear accounts for data analysis (Squire et al., 2013, p. 1). However, once interviews were selected as the chosen method for data collection, existing data analysis strategies for this medium were employed.

The collected data first underwent a preparatory stage for the analysis. All nine interviews were transcribed on an online word processor and the recordings in Russian were translated into English. Despite employing interpretative qualitative research methods, systematic analysis in this thesis is ensured by applying a number of analytical strategies outlined in relevant methodological literature and practice. Narrative data analysis requires generating themes that represent patterns observable across the data set (Roulston, 2014, p. 302). To do so, I chose to create and use a coding table to represent my initial understanding and assertions, and then use it to read through and systematically code all selected interviews. It required first going through the theoretical framework, namely counter-narrative theory, and identifying the key categories, or frames, that would be used for the analysis (Roulston, 2014, p. 305) The key frames are 1) the deconstruction of a master-narrative; 2) a focus on social impact, transformation, and change; and 3) a focus on marginalised and/or oppressed groups. In order to fully answer the stated research questions, two supplementary frames were added to the table, namely 4) means of actions; and 5) challenges to NGO action. Codes, defined as single words or short sentences symbolically representing a datum, were associated with each of these five frames (Saldana, 2020, p. 899). This time, the codes emanated not from theory but from the topic at hand, namely NGOs and bride kidnapping in

Kyrgyzstan, and the literature on this subject, as outlined in the context and literature review chapters (see the coding table below).

Once the coding table was established manually, all transcribed and anonymised interviews were uploaded to the chosen software for data analysis, NVivo. On this platform, the coding table was replicated and a thorough read-through of all interviews was done, while the generated codes were systematically associated with relevant quotes. The latter were usually sentences but at times longer paragraphs. Annotations on the text were also made to develop the ideas associated with specific codes, allowing for more in depth-analysis and interpretation.

After all interviews were systematically analysed, a patterning process was undertaken through NVivo to detect trends and similarities within the data (Saldana, 2020, p. 883). The software allows for all quotes grouped under a specific code to be displayed together, thus facilitating the detection of patterns and trends, and enabling cross-data set analysis in line with narrative data analysis objectives. At this stage, space was also made for the detection of data discounting prior assertions, in other words data revealing unexpected elements to the analysis.

Coding table:

	Frames from counter-narrative theory			Supplementary frames	
	Deconstructing the master-narrative	Focus on social impact, transformation and change	Focus on marginalised/oppressed groups	Means of action	Challenges to NGO action
Corresponding codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tradition/crime (emphasis on the law) - gender roles (status of women) - family structure - patriarchy (matriarchy) - honour and shame (values) - violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - choice - equality, women's rights, human rights - dreams, self-realisation - political situation (current context) - legal framework - awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - target groups/audiences - women, girls - rural versus urban, education levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tools - projects - campaigns - arenas for change, advocacy work (all levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funding, resources - political context

	- importance of marriage (life success) - private matter				
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Once trends and patterns are identified through the previous steps and the data is systematically presented, interpretation of the data is the final step in the narrative inquiry process. As opposed to data analysis, which involves summarising and presenting the data, interpretation involves making sense of and finding the meaning in the data. Most importantly, in the interpretative stage the research questions remain at the forefront of considerations. As interpretative description fits within the inductive analytical tradition in qualitative research, conclusions are drawn on the basis of the findings outlined (Thorne, 2020, p. 157). Moreover, the implications of the findings, what they reveal about the issue at hand and how they assist in answering the research questions, are put in light of the theoretical framework and the expectations that arise from it. However, remaining open to new unforeseen elements allows for a deeper understanding of the issue researched than could have been expected. In this, interpretation does not lend itself to revealing the “truth”, here regarding narratives on bride kidnapping in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, but instead sheds light on the possibilities for thought and action on this issue. Truth is, moreover, unattainable in qualitative research as meaning is ascribed by the researcher. Methodology and interpretation are intertwined as the chosen methods and analytical strategies impact the interpretation process (Trent & Cho, 2020, p. 965). For example, the questions posed in the interviews already shape what I want to reveal and thus guide how I will confer meaning to the data collected. The coding process is in itself also already an interpretative process (Idem 2020). As such, the notions of standpoint and reflexivity are essential in the interpretative stage of qualitative research. While standpoint will be further elaborated on below in the limitations section, regarding reflexivity I can acknowledge the role of my *self* in interpreting my findings and suggest that contextualising my interpretation, in line with narrative inquiry features, assists in mitigating my positioning (Idem 2020, p. 974). Overall, the interpretative stage is focused on answering the research question by focusing on identifying the narratives, and potential counter-narratives, brought forward by NGO respondents, with an emphasis on how this is portrayed in their work.

Limitations of the study

As previously stated, the issue of standpoint is central to qualitative and interpretive research. Indeed, data is analysed through the perspective of the researcher, who oftentimes holds preconceived ideas based on literature or other reasons associated to his or her positioning. As such, the researcher plays an important role in “constituting the narrative data that they analyse” (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020, p. 305). It can thus be said that objectivity, underscored in quantitative and positivist types of research, is neither possible nor the goal of qualitative and interpretive research (Thorne, 2020, p. 156; Trent & Cho, 2020, p. 957). Regarding this study, my standpoint as a Western woman influenced by feminist ways of thinking in my academic, as well as personal, environment is likely to impact my understanding and analysis of the data collected. However, the choice of focusing on the work of Kyrgyz women’s NGOs is a way to overcome parts of the biases I may have about the issue of bride kidnapping. Indeed, giving a voice to local groups working on this phenomenon allows me to take a step back from the issue itself, its reasoning or justification, by focusing on how local actors interpret it and perhaps challenge it.

A second limitation is the small sample group and the resulting inability to speak for Kyrgyz NGOs more generally, drawing broader conclusions, or for those situated outside of the capital. However, counter-narrative theory claims that as a framework it is more likely to uncover nuances and in depth portraits of narratives, how and for whom they are told, if it is applied on a smaller scale (Lueg et al., 2022, p. 7). Therefore, analysing only the perspectives and work of a limited number of women’s NGOs in Bishkek will allow for a richer account of the multifaceted and varied work that they do and the impact that they wish to have.

Ethical considerations

In line with the IMCEERES requirement, I submitted an ethics application to the University of Glasgow’s ethics committee and started collecting data only once it was approved. Confidentiality was provided by the attribution of an ID number to each respondent (letters A through I). As such, the names of the participating NGOs are not disclosed in this thesis. The

consent form (see Appendix 4.) and plain language statement (see Appendix 3.) were distributed in person to each participant before the interviews (see Appendix 2.) All the documents provided to participants were translated into Russian and the interpreter used for the interviews conducted in Russian signed a memorandum committing to confidentiality. All participants signed the consent form to take part in this study.

6. Presentation of findings

“In the GALIS methodology, the first tool is a dream and a journey to a dream. When women draw what they dream about, no one draws Ala Kachuu ” (Respondent F)

The core of both the data analysis and the interpretation processes are guided by the research questions. As stated in the introduction, the questions guiding this study are the following:

Main research question:

To what extent do women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan articulate counter-narratives regarding the case of bride kidnapping?

Sub-questions:

1. How do women’s NGOs position themselves vis-à-vis the existing narratives around bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan?
2. In light of the narratives they articulate, for what purpose do women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct their work on bride kidnapping?
3. How do women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct their work on bride kidnapping and how does it reflect the narratives they articulate?
4. What challenges do women’s NGOs face in regards to their articulation of narratives and to the achievement of their objectives on bride kidnapping?

As such, the data collected for this research will be presented in this chapter in four parts, each dedicated to answering a specific question and reflecting the findings of this study. The four parts are 1) Women’s NGOs and the master-narrative on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan; 2) Purpose of engagement on bride kidnapping and articulation of narratives; 3) Means through which women’s NGOs articulate narratives; and 4) Limitations and challenges women’s NGOs face in fulfilling their objectives regarding the case of bride kidnapping.

The implications of these findings will be outlined in the next chapter dedicated to interpretation and discussion.

Women's NGOs and the master-narrative on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan

This section addresses the first sub-question: How do women's NGOs position themselves vis-à-vis the existing narratives around bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan? As elaborated on in the theoretical framework, master and counter-narrative go together, as the latter presupposes the existence of the former. As such, in order to identify whether a counter-narrative is formulated by an actor, here local women's NGOs, a master-narrative must first be established.

Throughout the retained nine interviews with NGO respondents, all participants framed the practice of bride kidnapping as emanating, in one way or another, from the Kyrgyz contested tradition of Ala Kachuu. While the entirety of the sample group of respondents disagreed that the contemporary approach to this practice is a Kyrgyz tradition, and should not be considered as such, NGO respondents set bride kidnapping against the so-called "tradition" of (consensual) bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. To illustrate this, one respondent used the tragic case of Aizada Kanatbekova, abducted in broad daylight in Bishkek and then killed by her kidnapper in April 2021, and the reaction of the police to demonstrate that the dominant narrative around Ala Kachuu is that of a tradition, "just the way it is":

"Even our policemen, who are obliged to look for a woman who is kidnapped, didn't do anything because they believed that it's just the way it is, that they [Azaida and her abductor] were going to be married. They said to her mother "you're going to have a wedding soon, just don't worry too much". (Respondent A)

Another respondent referenced the prevalence and acceptance of this practice, this time among the political elite, to demonstrate the status of tradition that bride kidnapping maintains in Kyrgyzstan:

“A year ago, when Japarov [current President of Kyrgyzstan] came for a round table discussion [with members of civil society], his representative on human rights issues laughed and said, “What are you running around with this topic of bride kidnapping, this Ala Kachuu? I stole my wife and we live happily! Now what? Should all the guys be put in jail for loving girls?” This has been a problem from the beginning. Back in 2008, a state delegation went to the CEDAW and when the committee asked them questions [on bride kidnapping], they said that “It's our good tradition.” (Respondent E)

Participants in the study, when asked how their organisation responds to the narrative of tradition regarding the phenomenon of bride kidnapping all, without exception, responded along the lines of Respondent G that they have “a clear position that this is not a tradition”. While they did not all agree on whether this was an ‘invented tradition’, they all shared the sense that this was part of a broader process of attempted traditionalisation in the country since independence. Moreover, an identified trend among responses was the importance given to not labelling bride kidnapping a tradition. In line with the importance granted to terminology highlighted in the literature review on this practice, respondents stressed the need to move away from the label of tradition for this practice to be countered, as illustrated by this answer:

“I generally try to avoid the word “tradition”, because we seem to be calling it a tradition, thus making it a tradition. That's not true. And one of the methods of struggle is to say that this is not a tradition.” (Respondent I)

The presentation of the above data clearly establishes *tradition* as the master-narrative surrounding the practice of bride kidnapping, in line with the dominant literature on this subject. Interestingly, the interviews also consistently pointed to a cultural context in Kyrgyzstan in which this master-narrative is justified and the practice thus persists. In their answers to questions which were not directly pointed at this, most respondents spoke at length on larger cultural narratives explaining the persistence of the practice and contextualising its consequences. In doing so, women’s NGO respondents indicate that bride kidnapping as a social phenomenon is overwhelmingly shaped by societal attitudes and narratives in a bottom up process of traditionalisation.

Women's NGO respondents identified gender norms and roles, the importance of marriage in society, the values of honour and shame, a patriarchal society and a silence culture as explaining factors for the persistence of the bride kidnapping practice and the master-narrative of tradition, as exemplified by this selection of quotes:

On gender norms and the importance of marriage:

“Socialisation is strong. Crawling babies are asked: “Where is your bride?”
(Respondent D)

“A woman is a man's property, “you belong to me, I can behave with you as with my personal property.” And no one will be against it, because there is such a thing as the institution of virginity.” (Respondent F)

“She will get married, give birth to children, her place in society will be defined as a married lady... And this is also argued by the fact that we all went through this. Especially in rural areas. And most often people, especially women, consider this as the norm, because they don't know anything else.” (Respondent C)

On the values of honour and shame:

“The difference between wanting and actually reporting [bride kidnapping] is very high. As a patriarchal society, we have a very strong sense of shame against women and girls who get kidnapped because of what they do to kidnap girls, they rape them. This is seen as shame on the family, and this truly impacts women's will to report and go public with these cases.” (Respondent A)

“The problem is when the girls call their parents [after the kidnapping] and they say: “stay [in the house of the abductor], don't embarrass us anymore.” (Respondent E)

On silence culture:

“We have a big culture of not talking about our problems, of keeping them in the private sphere, a silence culture” (Respondent A)

The context against which women’s NGO participants frame bride kidnapping, and in which they thus formulate their position on the issue, plays a substantial role in explaining their engagement, what they choose to tackle and how.

Against the master-narrative of tradition, all NGO respondents stated that, in the words of Respondent C, “Ala Kachuu is not a tradition, it is a crime.” Throughout the nine selected interviews, no respondent presented another position than that of considering the practice a *crime*. In the eyes of the participants it appeared to be a clear-cut dichotomy between the two, as best illustrated by this women’s NGO representative:

“We work in the direction that this is not a tradition, we inform that there is a law, that this is not a tradition, that if the tradition was good there would be no criminal liability for it.” (Respondent E)

The reference to the existing legal framework punishing the practice in order to support the *crime* narrative is common to all NGO participants. Pointing to Article 172 of the Criminal Code has become the strongest argument against the master-narrative of tradition used by members of civil society. However, the perception regarding whether having a punishing legal framework has increased the awareness of criminal liability among the population is debated among the interview participants. While Respondent F claimed that “nowadays we have some kind of developed understanding among our people that it's a criminal act”, Respondent E considered that the lack of “information work with the population” results in “both girls and boys still thinking that stealing is normal.” In any case a common finding among the data set was that despite the existing legal framework, an environment of impunity around bride kidnapping crimes persists. While no consensus was reached regarding whether or not cases of bride kidnapping were decreasing, with most of the participants not being able to answer this question, all NGO representatives agreed that the legal framework does not work properly and, therefore, does not protect victims. Some respondents pointed to the lack of interest from a male-dominated political sphere and others to the lack of gender-sensitive training of the police force. Respondent C also pointed to the larger cultural narratives mentioned above in her answer:

“I like the English word “impunity” very much: impunity is everywhere. Therefore, it leads to such consequences [a woman’s experience in forced marriage, including rape and psychological trauma]. You know that we have strengthened, toughened the punishment for Ala Kachuu. But, again, very few people apply it [the law]. And why? Because stereotypes are deep. Bad, harmful practices, terrible stereotypes. They lead women to become victims.”

A final commonality among responses is the reference to the violence of the bride kidnapping practice, further explaining why it cannot be deemed a tradition. Most respondents qualified bride kidnapping as a form of gender based violence (GBV), as it is categorised in international reports on the issues, by institutions such as the UN or CEDAW more specifically. Respondent C believed that the ancient ‘tradition’, where two people from different social classes could not get married and they therefore eloped, has now been misappropriated and is “just violence against women”, a vision shared by most interviewees. Two respondents mentioned that rape is very frequent in the practice of bride kidnapping:

“I call arranged marriages rape, not kidnapping. The woman goes even further into slavery. Nobody gets married here. Most often there is no official marriage.”⁹
(Respondent D)

“On the wedding night after the *nikah*¹⁰, a young man, in order to show his wealth and masculinity, must rape the woman and hang up a sheet with a blood stain. That is, a crime upon a crime.” (Respondent F)

In mentioning that many unions established by kidnapping “start under duress” (Respondent H), NGO representatives also argue that such marriages are prone to more and other forms of GBV in the future. Further illustrating the fundamental element of violence, one respondent described the centrality of the practice to their work as such:

⁹ This is a reference to the fact that most unions sealed after bride kidnapping are religious marriages, which are often not registered with the state. This results in women facing issues to receive protection against domestic violence, for example.

¹⁰ The *nikah* is the name of the religious marriage under Islamic law

“Kidnapping of women is one of the priority issues that our organisation deals with. We consider [this phenomenon] not only as forcing a woman to marry, but more broadly as the deprivation of freedom, and the cruel, inhuman treatment of women. It is torture.” (Respondent G)

To conclude, the findings exposed in this section reveal patterns of similarity among the data set in regards to the question of narratives articulated by women’s NGO respondents. Indeed, all participants set their position on bride kidnapping against the dominant cultural narrative of *tradition*. Faced with this master-narrative, all interviewees articulated an opposing position on behalf of their organisation, that of considering bride kidnapping a *crime*.

Purpose of engagement on bride kidnapping and articulation of narratives

In light of the findings exposed in the previous section, this part will address the second sub-question: For what purpose do women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct work on bride kidnapping? As civil society organisations, NGOs usually have clearly identified mandates (the authority conferred to an organisation to carry out given tasks), stated missions, goal, target groups, and a vision behind their activities. Although these elements can be briefly found on the websites of each interviewed organisation, conversations with the representatives of the nine selected women’s NGOs allowed for the identification of many elements of focus, angles and common trends in their objectives that could not be found online. Regarding narratives, at the centre of this study, examining the purpose of engagement of women’s NGOs reveals the nature of their goals and therefore allows for the assessment of whether or not these are transformative, as per counter-narrative theory.

The overarching purpose for all nine women’s NGOs’ engagement on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan is the promotion of human rights, and women’s rights especially, in light of their position on the practice as a crime and not a tradition. Respondent E’s explanation that her organisation’s “mission is to promote gender equality and promote the rights of girls and women” broadly summarises the position of all other respondents on this issue. When asked

what the organisation's definition of women's rights is, another respondent provided a comprehensive answer, which illustrates a commonly identified pattern:

“Women's rights are when every girl and woman can make a decision on her own: where she should study, how much she should study, where she should work and how she should work, start a family, get married by her own consent or build a career without restrictions, or go into politics, run for deputy, for example. That is, she herself can make these decisions and no one can limit her in this or deny her these opportunities.” (Respondent G)

This definition sheds light on a more specific purpose of engagement found in NGO respondent's discourses, that of promoting the acceptance of dreams and promises of self-realisation, understood as the fulfilment of girls and women's potential, in Kyrgyzstan. This goal is closely tied to the issue of bride kidnapping, a practice that has a far-reaching impact on the lives of women, as pointed out by respondents who mentioned the issues of violence, shame and honour, and the lack of legal and economic protection of religious marriages. A number of NGO representatives argued that bride kidnapping, as a violent interruption into their lives, prevents girls and women from living out their dreams and becoming who they originally wanted to be, as illustrated by this respondent's comment pointing to society's disregard of women's choices:

“The stereotype [about marriage] is that it is for the benefit of the girl herself. That she will get married, give birth to children, and that her place in society will be defined as a married lady ... no one says anything about her happiness or her wishes.”
(Respondent C)

Respondent A further claimed that it is almost normal for every girl in Kyrgyzstan to think about bride kidnapping and fear it, invoking her personal experience by saying that when she was “around eight years old [she] already had plans in [her] head about what [she is] going to do when somebody kidnaps [her].” Respondents, thus, frame their action as working toward a Kyrgyz society in which girls and women “have the right to dream and there are conditions for development and self-realisation.” (Respondent E)

A second commonality in the stated purpose of engagement of women's NGOs on bride kidnapping is the desire to raise awareness to this issue in society. This entails spreading awareness on the laws punishing the practice and the rights that victims have. Strengthening the legal framework to protect women further and ensuring good practice by law enforcement institutions is key to many organisations' work. However, all NGOs involved in this research stated that working on the legal framework alone is not enough. In the words of Respondent H, "Regarding Ala Kachuu, it is impossible to cut it down overnight. It is necessary to work with the consciousness of people, to give information." Another respondent ironically joked that "if you strictly follow the law, she [the kidnapped woman] will end up without relatives, without anyone." Pointing to the involvement of a large part of the family in the practice of bride kidnapping, Respondent H more importantly underscores that focusing on the legal framework is not the most fruitful approach. All NGO respondents instead stressed the need to focus on changing perceptions and behaviours around the issue of bride kidnapping to create more holistic change in society and end this harmful practice at its root, as, again, the phenomenon is informed by *social* attitudes and narratives. Respondent A explains her organisation's awareness raising goals as such:

"We try to keep doing that [raising awareness] because maybe one in 1000 people is going to understand this [that kidnapping is wrong] and they're going think, "oh, OK, I'm not going to do that." I know it's very little, but we spread information and try to keep on doing that."

Awareness raising work can thus in other words be considered as prevention-oriented work, as opposed to the reaction-oriented legal sphere. It is interesting to note here that according to participants, it is women's NGOs' advocacy and awareness raising work that initially changed the perception of Ala Kachuu, turning it into a "social problem in society" that needed to be addressed (Respondent B). According to Respondent I, this work has paid off today as "the growing feeling in society that Ala Kachuu is a problem is due to greater openness on this issue, the fact that they [civil society organisations] began to talk about it more." Starting conversations on issues of violence, women's rights and equality appears to be a shared goal of the participants in order to slowly change the norms around these issues.

Regarding the purpose of engagement of civil society organisations on a social issue, an important element is the targeted audience. Behind the NGOs' vision and their stated

objectives lie target groups towards whom all activities are aimed, those who can be considered to be the beneficiaries of their action. The notion of *for whom* narratives are told, expressed through their interviews, is also a crucial element in counter-narrative theory, as outlined in the theoretical chapter. Respondents in this research all elaborated on who their work was dedicated to and why. Importantly, the analytical process revealed that this is the first element of diverging visions between the participating organisations.

As the issue at hand is bride kidnapping, a form of gender-based violence and a practice consisting of abducting a woman for marriage, and that promoting women's rights and gender equality has been hailed as a core purpose of NGO engagement, it is natural that all participants identified girls and women as their primary audience. As explained by Respondent G, "many development programs have worked with women as they are more discriminated against. And now there is a clear association: gender is women, women's rights." In this regard, awareness raising and prevention work is directed at girls in order for them to "understand their rights" (Respondent D) and work toward a society where women can "live freely and without violence." (Respondent C)

More specifically, participants identified young girls and mothers as their target audience. Respondent C deemed that "the more you inform, especially young girls, the better the result." Focusing on young girls is justified by the fact that they are most often the victims of bride kidnapping. Regarding the age of victims of abductions, respondent A explains that there is a trend to kidnap girls right after they graduate from school:

"The wedding season is right after girls finish [high] school. Especially in rural areas, to escape bride kidnapping, girls go to the city to study and never come back. Because even if you go [back to the village] for a day or two, you get kidnapped."

The focus on mothers stems from their significant involvement in the practice of bride kidnapping, as detailed by one respondent:

"We must understand that when a boy steals his bride, his mother has a special status. Clearly she now has power and control.¹¹ There is a cycle of violence around mothers

¹¹ Refer back to the literature review to read more on family structure in Kyrgyzstan and how a kidnapping bride is integrated into her new husband's family.

and bride kidnapping. They tell their daughters or daughters-in-law: “I was also stolen. I lived that way too. Why shouldn't it be like this with you?” Mothers are not quite ready to exit this cycle.” (Respondent F)

These findings lead into another target group identified by a number of participants, that of families and parents more broadly. Respondent G points clearly to the necessity of addressing not just daughters but also the parents involved:

“We worked with girls for many years, but then we realised that they are not the ones making decisions. The guys [those kidnapping] themselves are not making these decisions. The decisions are made by the parents, by the family. Once we realised this, we started working with families.”

Given the role of parents in the bride kidnapping process, the aim of NGOs in changing their perceptions and behaviours around the issue is to create “good role models” (Respondent E) for their children, in order for the cycle of violence and constraint. In this regard, a third identified pattern regarding the purpose of NGO engagement is the goal of increasing intra-family communication in the country. The objective here is thus to create an environment, through their awareness raising activities, where girls “who are kidnapped call their parents to come get them from the abductor’s house” (Respondent G). This requires trust in one’s family, communication around issues of gender-based violence and values, such as marriage and honour, that women’s NGOs hope can be obtained from their work.

Finally, a target group that only a small number of participants mentioned, three out of nine, is that of boys and men. Interestingly it is the same participants who mentioned working with families and parents, as opposed to only with girls, who also included boys and men in their target audiences. One respondent shared her personal feelings, not representative of her organisation, towards this issue saying that “As a feminist, I'm tired of women being targeted all the time, people saying “Don't stay silent, stand up for yourself etc...” Tell men not to kidnap or not to grab girls or not to do anything, tell men not to rape them” (Respondent A). Another respondent explained her NGO’s engagement with boys and men as an attempt to create more holistic changes given the negative impact that a patriarchal context has on all individuals in society, and that focusing only on one target group in a community is not enough:

“When we started [working on bride kidnapping], we realised that they [boys] suffer just as much, if not more, from patriarchal attitudes and restrictive social norms. There are many existing male stereotypes and growing your hair, putting on other clothes that are not so masculine in appearance is badly perceived. Boys also suffer from these impositions. When we started working with boys, these things began to show up. And that is why we are now trying to work with entire families in all of our projects. Because even if you pull one person out of the family and change him (or her), he or she returns again to the same environment. And it will be even worse for them than before, because their awareness of problems has grown, but their environment has remained the same.” (Respondent G)

Regarding boys and men, the goal is thus to support this group in building, in the words of Respondent E, “positive fatherhood and non-toxic youth.” Respondent G explains that in Kyrgyzstan “Starting from childhood, no one teaches how to resolve conflicts. We are used to everyone yelling at each other and there is no culture of conflict management.” In this context she adds that boys and men are prone to developing violent behaviours, supported by the role and norms that are imposed onto them from birth. This assessment led her NGO to start focusing on boys and start conducting activities aimed at “teaching boys about confident and non-violent behaviour.” Moreover, Respondent A’s statement that in Kyrgyzstan “we have role models for women, we have wonderful geniuses and strong women around, but for men, we don't have that many”, indicates that the goal with this target group is the same as with parents outlined above, that of creating role models in Kyrgyzstan. According to participants, having positive examples of people (either famous for the country as a whole or unknown and reserved to people around their community) would slowly change perceptions and behaviours around bride kidnapping.

To conclude, regarding the question of the purpose of women’s NGO engagement on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, the findings outlined in this section once again reveal patterns of similarity among the data set. The patterns of: the promotion of women’s rights (the acceptance of dreams and promises of self-realisation for girls and women); raising awareness (to the laws prohibiting bride kidnapping and even more to the need to change attitudes and behaviours around it); and increasing intra-family communication were identified across the data set. Participants in this study demonstrated very similar goals for

their organisations. Divergence among the data set appeared when discussing the target audiences. Indeed, while all respondents indicated that girls and women were their primary audience and target group, three out of nine participants added that their NGOs also focused on families and parents, as well as boys and men.

Means through which women's NGOs articulate narratives

This section addresses the third sub-question: how do women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan conduct their work on bride kidnapping and how does it reflect the narratives they articulate? The findings exposed in this part build on those outlined above: the narratives of women's NGOs and the goals they pursue in their engagement on bride kidnapping. After the *for whom*, the *how* of narrative articulation is another important element of counter-narrative theory.

The analysis and the coding process identified a number of arenas of work for women's NGOs, as means through which the narrative they articulate around bride kidnapping are made visible. None of the interviewed organisations dedicate their work to a single area of activity and all engage in numerous different types of work. These include the aforementioned strengthening of the legal framework and monitoring of the implementation of laws around bride kidnapping, and awareness raising initiatives. It also includes an arena of work not previously mentioned, that of advocacy. The participants explained that one way of pursuing their objectives was through national and international advocacy, and cooperation with actors on both stages.

At the international level, the main mechanism of advocacy cited by respondents in this study is their participation in the CEDAW. Most NGOs in this research have used their monitoring work (the information and data they gather on the ground during the implementation of their activities) as input for civil society reports sent to CEDAW, which are then used by the international body to make recommendation to the Kyrgyzstani authorities on issues of women's rights. Respondent E pointed to the impact that such advocacy work can have by stating that "CEDAW's assessment of women's rights in the country deriving from the monitoring work of NGOs formed the basis of the National Plans to reach gender equality in Kyrgyzstan, which included the prevention of Ala Kachuu."

At the national level, participants pointed to two main recipients of their advocacy work: the government and national parliament, and religious leaders. Regarding the former, respondent B spoke about their close cooperation with the national parliament and the training that NGOs can provide to members of parliament on issues of gender-based violence: “As the institution that overlooks the implementation of laws, we work a lot with parliamentarians. We developed a manual for them on how to control the implementation of laws related to issues of bride kidnapping.” Respondents also often mentioned that in every one of their activities they try to get as much support and involvement from members of the government or parliament as possible, to enhance the reach of their projects. Regarding religious leaders, they have been identified by many NGOs as targets of advocacy activities. Respondent D explained this by the enduring influence of these leaders in society:

“We are still a religious country. Thousands of men come to the Friday prayer, and if the Imam leading the prayer says some important things, then it becomes important for everyone. If he says there not to beat women, (...) then people change their minds, think, talk among themselves, and so on.”

As mentioned in the second section of this analysis chapter, the role of religious leaders in bride kidnapping is very important as religious marriages, the *nikah*, are usually celebrated to seal the union in this practice. However, religious marriages are most often not registered with the state. The consequences of this are highlighted by Respondent C:

“Since the *nikah* does not represent any rights for women, in the event of a divorce, they are left on the street with absolutely nothing. Because according to the law, if you are legally married, then you can claim half of the property. But if you do not have official registration, then [none of this applies].”

Multiple participants pointed to successes in their advocacy work with religious leaders, especially in the case of bride kidnappings involving minors:

“Thanks to all these advocacy actions by NGOs, a corresponding fatwa¹² was issued by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, which prohibits religious

¹² A formal ruling given by a qualified legal scholar of Islam, a Mufti

figures from performing such rituals [the *nikah* when minors are abducted].” (Respondent B)

“Now there is a law¹³ that no clergyman can perform the Nikah rite without a certificate of official registration.” (Respondent C)

Respondent G summarised women’s NGOs’ advocacy work and how narratives are articulated within it when she said: “Overall, we try from all sides [with all targets of advocacy] to prove that there is no such tradition.” (G)

In regards to their overarching goals of changing attitudes and behaviours around bride kidnapping in the country for the target audiences identified in the previous section, however, it is the more creative and awareness raising activities that NGOs tend to favour. The interviews conducted for this research revealed that women’s NGOs initiate and take part in a wide-range of awareness raising projects. A recurring pattern in all projects is the innovative element. In order to reach the largest audience possible, these civil society organisations all attempt to design creative projects. Two organisations in the data set described awareness raising projects in which the narratives around bride kidnapping are at the centre of the project and clearly visible. These two projects are ‘Swallows, Spring in Bishkek’¹⁴, a mobile game application, and ‘Kalyc’¹⁵, a comic book.

‘Swallows, Spring in Bishkek’ is a mobile game application developed as an interactive story in which players shape the scenario by answering prompts. Through its simulation of a girl having to respond to her best friend getting kidnapped for forced marriage, it aims to raise awareness in Kyrgyz society on the issue. Respondents involved in this projects explain the concept as such:

“Helped by notes written by psychologists, activists and lawyers, every girl who plays makes choices: to help, not to help; to call, not to call.” (Respondent E)

¹³ “The so-called Nikah Law allows for prosecution of religious authorities who perform child marriages, parents, or other adults who facilitate such marriages, and adults who marry children and carries a penalty of two to six-and-a-half years in prison” (Human Rights Watch, May 2019)

¹⁴ Translated from the Russian ‘Ласточки: Весна в Бишкеке’

¹⁵ Translated from the Russian ‘Калыс’

“Our position is clear. We are against Ala Kachuu. We are against early or forced marriages, but at the same time [we did not want to give the girls a direct order.] We wanted to bring the girls to these things and answer the question by themselves. For example, regarding the ‘curse’¹⁶: the game tells you that if you leave [your husband after the kidnapping], you will be cursed. [We immediately offered them the point of view] that this curse does not exist. We also explained to them what rights they have legally. All the questions that may arise around the abduction, we tried to answer them [in notes on the game screen]. At the same time, we did not say directly: this is good, this is bad, do it this way, don't do it this way. The girl herself must come to these conclusions, and all of this is gently put in the form of advice.” (Respondent I)

Respondent I's statement clearly demonstrates how this NGO's narrative on bride kidnapping is reflected in the game. Respondent E also pointed to this when she said “In all our visual materials, and in our game, everything is written everywhere that this [bride kidnapping] is a crime.” (E) She also expanded on the raising awareness objective in the game specifically: “Our audience was girls, so that girls have a tool through which they can themselves simulate the event. So that, God forbid, they get into such a situation, they know what to do.”

The game's reception by the public was very positive. Respondent E revealed the success of the game by pointing to the number of downloads: “We had 70,000 downloads in one month, although we had planned 25,000 per year. The first month we couldn't believe it at all. We have received 167,000 installations and now the game is no longer developing, but 161,000 still have the game installed, they have not removed it. I think that's great. Everyone is asking for a new game.”

¹⁶ The ‘curse’ is related to the loss of virginity after the wedding night



Photo cover of the mobile game application and extract from the game¹⁷

‘Kalyc’ is a comic book divided into three stories of bride kidnapping. As explained by Respondent G “All three chapters are based on true stories. The first story shows a girl running away from the kidnappers. The second story is about a girl staying and being raped on her “wedding” night, but her parents coming to eventually pick her up and suing the family. The third shows an example of what can happen when parents act properly from the very beginning.” The last story is also based on another awareness raising project by this NGO, namely an instruction manual for daughters and mothers on what to do in a kidnapping situation:

“We wrote instructions on how to behave for the girls, saying that they shouldn’t freak out, shouldn’t get hysterical, they should remain calm. We explained that if you try to leave abruptly [during the kidnapping act], you can be physically harmed. Step by step we also give mothers instructions on how to behave¹⁸, because they also do not know how to react to such situations. We turned these into a guide. In the comic, the last story is just based on these instructions. Parents and daughters agree in advance how to behave and when everyone behaves accordingly the story ends well.” (Respondent G)

¹⁷ The second picture shows an extract of the game entitled “Your choice”. You see the mother of an abductor telling a young woman: “If you don’t marry my grandson, I’ll curse you for life”. The game gives the women two options: “stay” or “leave”. (translated from Russian)

¹⁸ The comic book tells mothers to call the police once notified by their daughter that she has been kidnapped and to come pick her up at the abductor’s house. Once there, the mother should tell the abductor’s family that they are committing a crime and that they will be facing the police.

This third story also demonstrates how improving intra-family communication can prevent bride kidnappings. Indeed, as demonstrated in Picture 1, it shows how a mother should warn her daughter of the risks of bride kidnapping, explain to her that it is a crime, and reassure her that she will come pick her up immediately if this ever happens. As such, the daughter, as the story goes on, is able to react in safe and appropriate ways (calling her mother and remaining calm) when she is abducted. The story ends, as seen in Picture 2, when the mother comes to the kidnapper's house with the police and confronts his family, who think they are continuing "the traditions of their ancestors", telling them they are instead committing a crime and that she will be taking up a case in court against them.

The narratives around the practice articulated by the NGO are visible throughout the three stories. All three bride kidnapping accounts provide information, demonstrate the impact of abduction on women, and highlight positive examples of how more awareness of their rights and educated involvement of their parents can turn harmful situations around.



Picture 1. ¹⁹



Picture 2. ²⁰

¹⁹ Picture 1 shows a mother telling her daughter: "Getting married or not is only your business. But we are against Ala Kachuu, it is savagery. Tynym [the girl's name], if this happens to you, we will rush to you straight away." The daughter asks: "Mom, but girls stay when they are kidnapped thinking that this is a tradition?". The mother answers: " Daughter, Ala Kachu is not a tradition, it is a crime."

²⁰ Picture 2 shows the mother arriving at the abductor's house with the police and asking to see her daughter. The women involved in the kidnapping become afraid and say: "Oh, don't do that. We are

These two projects highlight commonly identified patterns that were also noted in other projects mentioned, albeit in less details, by other participants. The first is the focus on the impact of bride kidnapping of women, highlighting the consequences of such a practice on their lives, and focusing on facts. Respondent A, speaking on behalf of a media NGO who for example, produced a documentary on the Aizada case that demonstrated police inaction and impunity, explains how their organisation focuses on the impact on women:

“We show that after they are kidnapped, raped and forced into marriage, the men often leave them, or maybe beat them and it ends in femicide because women don't feel safe enough to stand up for themselves, they don't feel educated enough to find work or money to live on. There are so many consequences. We also like to share the data that there are only a few cases that go to court and only a few perpetrators that get sentences and punishment. We also put in context the statistics about early marriage and that a lot of girls here don't get proper education because they are kidnapped. Therefore, we always try to highlight the woman suffering versus the man walking free.”

The second identified pattern in women's NGO projects is the way they frame women not only as victims, but also as survivors and actors of change. The mobile game application and the comic both clearly demonstrate the NGOs' desire to have women make their own decisions and fight back the bride kidnapping practice by knowing their rights and how to fight for legal protection from the state. In the context of many suicides by women who are kidnapped against their will, this position was also shared by Respondent A:

“We're trying to change the framing of the women involved, not as victims but as survivors who lived through these difficult experiences and still chose to live among us. It is the whole world against you and you're still going to live and have fun in this

guilty before you.” The mother asks her daughter if anybody touched her, the daughter replies “No, mom, everything is fine” and they hug each other. The daughter takes off the scarf the women had put onto her, symbolising the union. The three women are shocked by this act and say: “What are you doing?”, “You can't throw the scarf on the floor!”, and “We continue the traditions of our ancestors”. The story ends with the narrator saying: “You cover up the crime by calling it a tradition. You kidnapped an underaged girl. Even if she had been an adult, that is a crime! Swearing and arguing we all eventually went to the police. Our case is still pending.”

world. That's why it's important to frame it in that way. Giving agency and power. It is our responsibility as a media to frame it that way.”

Regarding the means through which women's NGOs articulate their narratives on bride kidnapping, one final element is important, that of the tools they use. One tool unique to fighting gender-based violence is the EU and UN-led Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology. Launched in 2016, GALS is “community-led empowerment methodology to promote more harmonious and violence-free relationships in families and communities” (UN Women Kyrgyzstan, 2021). As explained by Respondent F, this methodology is well-suited for attitude and behavioural change-oriented projects such as those of the women's NGOs participating in this research:

“This approach targets the individual level and family setting to develop the understanding of gender equality, differences and sensitivity. It takes on a workshop style with reflections and exercises... In Kyrgyzstan, we are implementing it very well in the rural areas. Thanks to this methodology, people review everything consciously, through their feelings. They begin to look differently at the same article [on bride kidnapping], and not because they want to put everyone in jail, but because it's right. This is a girl's right. For me today, this is one of the best tools with which you can tackle the problem at the root, change the outlook of people, change the attitude and create new norms for the right to choose (for both girls and guys) to start a family. And even if the girl does not want to get married, there is nothing wrong with that. Or if a young man decides not to marry, that is his right. And we are moving towards this through GALS. I see in it a good [prospect].”

Finally, all participants mentioned that social media was the main tool through which they spread and enhanced their work. Respondent E claimed that “It now seems that our websites are no longer relevant because of social networks”. This is especially the case when trying to reach a younger generation. The main platforms cited by respondents in this regard were Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok. This is also where the NGOs find comments and feedback on their work, and the main place where they engage directly with their community.

To conclude, the findings exposed in this section show the extent to which NGOs participating in this study engage in multiple arenas of work, including work to strengthen the

legal framework, advocacy and awareness raising projects. It is the latter, moreover, that appears for women's NGOs to be the most-suited for achieving their objectives of attitudes and behavioural change regarding bride kidnapping in the country. The projects exposed in this section highlight the NGO narratives on bride kidnapping defined in the first part of this chapter, that of qualifying it a crime rather than a tradition to be upheld. This section also revealed patterns noticeable in women's NGO's awareness-raising work, such as focusing on the impact of bride kidnapping on women and facts, as well as framing women as not only victims of the practice but also as survivors and actors of change in society. Finally, the GALS methodology and social media were identified as the two main tools used by NGOs to achieve their goals and spread their work to as large an audience as possible.

Challenges to women's NGOs articulation of narratives on bride kidnapping

The last section of this presentation of findings chapter addresses the fourth and final sub-question: What challenges do women's NGOs face in regards to their articulation of narratives and to the achievement of their objectives on bride kidnapping?

Throughout the nine selected interviews, participants in this study pointed to two main challenges they face in their work, and that consequently impact their articulation of narratives on bride kidnapping. The first is related to issues of funding and resources and the second to the current political context in Kyrgyzstan, namely the crackdown on civil society and the rise of Islamisation.

Challenges in fundraising to conduct projects and activities is a common problem for NGOs and other civil society actors. Most participants mentioned the difficulties in finding financial resources to sustain their work. Respondent B pointed to the financial dependency of NGOs, "when the project is over, everything is over". She, moreover, made the claim that within civil society "women's organisations are marginal" and struggle particularly to raise funds. To this, Respondent H added that this issue is even more prominent for shelters and NGOs that provide emergency and support services:

“We have a lot of organisations, but few of them offer services. Many prioritise information, research, and education. Sometimes there are only conversations, and this results in a lack of specific assistance. On top of that, the state does not always provide first aid and relies on shelters like ours, which are underfunded.”

Respondent B argued that a consequence of this lack of funding is lack of unity and cooperation among NGOs working on women’s issues: “Women's organisations do not cooperate because there is a struggle for resources.”

A challenge that appeared to more specifically impact women’s NGOs’ articulation of narratives on bride kidnapping is the current political context in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, this issue was cited by seven out of nine respondents as a challenge to their objectives. From respondent’s comments, this challenge can, moreover, be divided into two: the ongoing crackdown against civil society and the rise of Islamisation across the country.

Firstly, most participants in this study appeared to be concerned by the crackdown on NGOs undertaken by the current authorities in Kyrgyzstan. According to them, what was in the past considered to be the strongest and most vibrant democracy in Central Asia is backsliding:

“Why do we have a strong civil society? Because at the very beginning there was institutional support. Now there is not anymore. Many offices have closed, it is very difficult to register a new NGO, impossible to maintain assistants, accountants and so on. The very procedure for writing projects and reporting has become more complicated, they are making it very complicated. For example, last year we wrote 10 projects and we received nothing. We are experiencing constant attacks on the NGO sector” (Respondent B)

In this context, and despite women’s rights being weakened as a result, NGOs are facing increasing backlash for their activities, not only from the authorities but from parts of the population, as explained by Respondent F in a quote that again reflects the centrality of tradition, perhaps their ‘invention’, in Kyrgyz society and culture:

“Some of our people, including women in rural areas, believe that we want to make Europe out of Kyrgyzstan. They believe that all NGO workers want is to eradicate our values and traditions.”

Recent political developments such as the Russian-style draft law on foreign agents²¹ seem also to have added to the already increasing pressure on civil society organisations in the past years. Respondent B expressed a lack of hope in the future resulting from this situation, as well as concern for what could happen if NGOs were shut down and were no longer able to aid vulnerable groups:

“I don't see any hope. At some point there was a wind [of hope]...but with the foreign agent law... The situation is getting worse. I don't even see a way out. I don't see it at all. I can't even imagine if this pressure continues like this, if the situation does not change dramatically, who will work with these traditionally marginalised groups – with victims of violence? They [the government] don't know how to work with this contingent at all.”

Secondly, beyond the crackdown against civil society, women's NGOs raised concerns about increased religiousness, and more specifically Islamisation, in the country, identifying it as a major challenge to their work on bride kidnapping. They fear that this trend will impact girls and women's knowledge of their rights, leading to violence and immunity. Respondent C considers that “women willingly go into religion without understanding their rights or the opportunities they have.” The main concern that participants shared, moreover, is the fear that religiosity will reinforce patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes against women:

“We are against fundamentalism and all the obstacles it brings. It preaches submissiveness in everything. And that includes marriage. That is, your parents decide for you, and you go quietly for the person you are pointed towards. Issues of rights are pushed aside, especially in relation to women. A woman has only obligations. She is obligated in everything. And everything that concerns her behaviour, dress, social life, is regulated by prescriptions.” (Respondent C)

²¹ Refer back to the context chapter for more information on the draft Foreign Agent bill.

“In this big trend towards Islamisation, there are also all sorts of obscurantist things going on where a girl is told that she should stay at home, should obey her husband, obey God, etc... What's going on in their house? That is a big question.” (I)

In the eyes of one participant in this study, religion and the increasing levels of fundamentalism in Kyrgyzstan are, due to the reasons outlined above, “one of the support systems” (Respondent C) of violent practices.

To conclude, the findings exposed in this final section find that women’s NGOs representatives are concerned by trends in Kyrgyz society, namely a government crackdown on civil society and the rise of Islamisation, which they also consider to be challenges to their work and the objectives they have laid out. Either preventing them from operating on the ground or inciting more backlash against their work, both societal challenges impact their ability to articulate and spread their narratives on bride kidnapping.

7. Discussion

The data exposed above provides ample material for interpretation, answering the research questions and meaningful discussion on the issue of narratives around bride kidnapping, as well as the challenge to this practice in Kyrgyzstan. The interpretative phase, the final one in this research process, is undertaken in light of the theoretical framework, namely counter-narrative theory. In order to answer the main research question, the four sub-questions will first be answered considering the interpretative analysis of the findings.

When analysing the narratives brought forward by the participating NGOs on the issue of bride kidnapping, the three main theoretical features of counter-narrative theory (the deconstruction of a master-narrative, the focus on social change and transformation, and the focus on marginalised and/or oppressed groups) must be evaluated. Indeed, the main research question (To what extent do women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan articulate counter-narratives regarding the case of bride kidnapping?) calls into question whether women's NGO narratives on this societal issue fulfil the criteria of counter-narrative rhetoric and action, and, if so, how. It, moreover, calls into consideration the context in which these NGOs are operating in the country.

Firstly, the findings exposed in the first part (NGOs and the master-narrative on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan) reveal patterns of great similarity among the data sample in regards to women's NGO positioning on bride kidnapping. As all participants identify *tradition* as the dominant and persisting cultural narrative surrounding this phenomenon, they unanimously position themselves against this qualification and articulate an opposing position, that of considering bride kidnapping a *crime*. This opposition to a dominant and larger cultural narrative, with a clearly defined alternative positioning, is at the foundation of counter-narrative theory. In line with this, findings in this part, namely the emphasis by participants on the legal framework regulating this practice and the violence it involves to argue it is a harmful proceeding and not one that should be continued by 'tradition', suggest that NGOs working on issues of bride kidnapping deconstruct this master-narrative. They do so by pointing to its faults and highlighting how deeply ingrained a model of sense-making it is that some in society might have stopped questioning it, considering it a norm. In articulating an alternative narrative, that of *crime*, NGO respondents consciously grant

importance to naming it as such with the objective of challenging the normatively laden social order. This choice reflects narrative theory's element of performativity, in which narratives are not only informed by social context but in turn shape it by perpetuating, or here challenging, social beliefs.

As such, regarding the narratives articulated by women's NGO respondents on bride kidnapping, the findings indicate that NGOs working on this issue not only identify a master-narrative but also oppose and deconstruct it, constituting the first element in the framing of a counter-narrative.

Secondly, the findings exposed in the second part (Purpose of engagement on bride kidnapping and articulation of narratives) again reveal common trends among the data set in regards to the goals and ambitions of women's NGOs on the issue at hand. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that women's NGOs do not define their role and goals as just ending the practice of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. The sample group in this study displays broader and more targeted objectives regarding this issue, namely to promote women's rights, raise awareness in society to the issue of bride kidnapping and increase intra-family communication.

These stated goals point to an overall desire by women's NGOs to improve the environment in which women find themselves, an environment more equal, open and based on their dreams and choices rather than the impositions of others. It also demonstrates a vision in which these freedoms cannot exist in a violent society. Reducing violence, here the practice of bride kidnapping, is thus viewed as a necessary first step for the development of women in the country, one part of a larger programme. As such, it can be argued that women's NGO narratives on bride kidnapping, as exhibited through their stated objectives, are set within a broader narrative contest, that of fighting gender-based violence and unequal opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. The resistance by women's NGOs in this study to a broader system in which women are under-represented, marginalised and oppressed (in ways that go as far as becoming victims of femicides as a result of bride kidnapping) is in line with the counter-narrative characteristic of inserting lived experiences within larger societal struggles. Moreover, participating NGOs' central goal of raising awareness to bride kidnapping, and especially their focus on changing perceptions and behaviours around this practice, further brings to light the nature of women's NGO narratives on the issue. By choosing to tackle the issue at its root, focusing on youth and education to change attitudes at the earliest age possible, the NGOs in this study can be deemed to engage in social negotiation of

conventional norms, values, and expectations, again in line with a counter-narrative approach. Finally, respondent NGOs' goal of improving intra-family communication, through awareness-raising initiatives, fits within Bochner and Herman's concept of 'narrative inheritance'. By encouraging communication and trust-building on issues of gender-based violence and its consequences, such as fighting the deeply ingrained values of shame and dishonour that can lead families to repudiate their daughters after leaving a marriage that started with violence, these actors attempt to break this 'inheritance' and generational cycles of violence by making the master-narrative less resistant through time. Overall, within these stated purposes of engagement, participating respondents suggest that women's NGO narratives on bride kidnapping are transformative in nature. Aiming to bring about broad and profound change in society, especially when targeting attitudes and behaviours. The participating NGOs thus further comply with counter-narrative assumptions.

While the stated objectives of NGOs are in line with counter-narrative assumptions of transformational objectives, the targeted audience of a third of respondents does not correspond to theoretical expectations. As exposed above, divergence among the data set appeared when discussing for whom these narratives are being raised. A counter-narrative theoretical framework, centred around marginalised and/or oppressed groups, makes the primary target audience of 'women and girls', as demonstrated in the findings, an expected outcome. Women and girls are, indeed, the victims of bride kidnapping and of the consequences that often follow this practice (marital violence, economic and social violence, etc.), as well as those who often perpetuate the cycles of violence. Targeting mothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers, in light of their involvement in the bride abduction process, was thus to be expected. NGOs in this study position themselves as a voice reflecting the concerns of the non-privileged and the under-represented. They are the voice of women and girls in the international and national advocacy arenas they engage in, as well as the local communities they engage with. Targeting boys and men, however, as a group not conventionally considered marginal or oppressed by the social order, in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere, goes against theoretical assumptions. The reasons exposed by participants to explain this audience, nevertheless, open the possibility to viewing women's NGO engagement as even more transformative, and thus further confirming the counter-narrative potential that these social actors may have. Beyond arguing that patriarchy also impacts men by imposing norms and values that restrict them as well as women, a third of the participating NGOs consider that challenging the master-narrative of *tradition* cannot be achieved without

targeting the perpetrators of the practice. In a more holistic approach, these organisations deem that raising awareness only to women cannot achieve broader social change if they return to an environment in which the attitudes and behaviours of other actors involved in the practice have not been altered. As such, despite going against one element of theoretical expectations, that of focusing on marginal and oppressed groups, in increasingly engaging more with men and boys, women's NGOs respondents can in fact be considered to pursue even broader goals, reaching unexpected groups to increase their range and impact. In line with this, it can be argued that targeting an audience outside of the theoretical assumptions does not discount the transformative nature of women's NGOs' work, but that it may even enhance it further.

Overall, in regards to the purpose of women's NGO engagement on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, the findings suggest that, by aiming to promote women's rights, raise awareness in society to this issue and increase intra-family communication, their engagement is reflective of the second element in the framing of counter-narratives, that of focusing on social impact, transformation and change. Moreover, as a third of NGO respondents target not only women but also the theoretically unexpected group of men and boys, women's NGOs engagement could be considered to only partially comply with the third element of counter-narrative theory, that of focusing on marginalised and/or oppressed groups. However, it can also be suggested that considering these theoretical characteristics as complementary rather than independent and incompatible features offers a richer understanding of the potential of women's NGOs as counter-narrative actors as a whole. As such, women's NGO engagement, by increasingly including men and boys in their initiative, broadens the scope of target audiences prescribed by theoretical expectations, and reinforces the transformational element so central to counter-narratives.

Thirdly, the findings exposed in the third part (Means through which women's NGOs articulate narratives) demonstrate that participating NGOs engage in a wide-range of targeted activities, in which their narratives are clearly articulated. The fact that very few projects are directed only at bride kidnapping once again illustrates that women's NGOs insert this issue within a broader scope of work, considering it as just an element of larger projects. Using all mechanisms at their disposal to achieve their objectives, NGO participants point to more formal and classic avenues of work, such as engaging with national and local institutions, as well as more creative and innovative initiatives. The 'Swallows, Spring in Bishkek' mobile

phone application and the ‘Kalys’ comic book are remarkable illustrations of this. If counter-narratives are defined as “innovative and creative forces fostering societal change” (Lueg et al., 2022, p. 4), then the projects undertaken by women’s NGOs participating in this study perfectly reflect this element of innovation and creativity. It is in fact suggested that these original initiatives allow them to subtly and educationally raise awareness, in an accessible and playful way, to the issue of bride kidnapping and spread their narratives to the targeted audience. The means participating NGOs use thus serve their objectives and reflect their alternative narrative on this phenomenon, by the omnipresence of the narrative of *crime* over that of *tradition* in all mentioned projects in this study.

Moreover, how women are framed in these projects, as not just victims but also as survivors and agents of change in their own future, involving them to change attitudes and behaviours such as in the mobile phone application, can be deemed a reflection of the notion of agency present in counter-narrative theory. Indeed, by encouraging women and girls to know their rights, take action in the face of kidnapping, as well as dream and believe in their ability to achieve their ambitions according to their own will, women’s NGO projects and methodologies demonstrate an approach in which women and girls, those misrepresented in the master-narrative, can re-identify in more worthy terms and envisage a different life for themselves. Acknowledging that autonomy of choice is strongly impacted by structural issues, that emancipation and freedom cannot be imposed on anyone, and that resistance cannot be expected of all, agency is rather centred around encouraging engagement in interrogating the limits of what appears to be normal and natural and attempting to go beyond them (Hughes, 2002, p. 84). The awareness raising, conversation starting and behavioural changing objectives of NGOs in this study on a social phenomenon deeply tied to a specific context are thus in line with the poststructural notion of agency.

Overall, in regards to the means that women’s NGOs use to articulate their narratives, the findings of this research suggest that NGO engagement is comprehensive, varied, and innovative. Participating organisations demonstrate a wide-range and scale of projects and initiatives, in which their narratives and objectives are clearly reflected. NGO activities, moreover, align with counter-narrative theory’s central features of promoting agency to marginalised groups and inserting their work on bride kidnapping within larger social projects, as well as using innovation and creativity to enhance their reach and impact.

Fourthly and finally, the findings exposed in the fourth part (Challenges to women’s NGO articulation of narratives on bride kidnapping) point to significant obstacles in participating

NGOs' work on bride kidnapping, namely a government crackdown on civil society and the rise of Islamisation. The lack of funding to NGOs working on human rights issues resulting from the first challenge is increasingly preventing organisations from operating on the ground and accomplishing their missions. This limitation is foreseen in counter-narrative theory, as per Bamberg's note of the relevance of resources at the disposal of actors of change in accessing their ability to achieve their stated goals (Bamberg in Herman et al., 2005, p. 401). Linked to the current context of a shrinking civil society space in Kyrgyzstan, this issue is unlikely to be resolved in the nearest future, especially if the upcoming parliamentary vote on the draft Foreign Agent bill were to be passed.²² Combined with more generalised backlash against NGOs working on issues of women's rights, notably those questioning national 'traditions' invoking fear in parts of the populations that their customs are disappearing, the working environment for NGOs in the country is concerning. Moreover, the rise of Islamisation, a trend tied to the given time and place of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, is another challenge identified by respondents. Suggesting that this phenomenon is impacting girls and women's knowledge of their rights, as well as their opportunities, NGOs in this study fear that their visibility and range is weakening as violence and impunity continue to spread.

Overall, as demonstrated by some respondents' lack of hope in the future, the challenges of civil society crackdown and rise of religiousness pose serious threats to NGOs' ability to articulate narratives that do not align with dominant discourse, and thus to achieve their stated goals.

Considering the small sample group and the information provided by respondents during this study, the findings of this research reveal women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan working on bride kidnapping as a relatively homogenous group. As the participating organisations demonstrate no divergence regarding the narratives they articulate, little discrepancy regarding their objectives, all exhibiting transformational ambitions, and disparity in terms of target groups that in fact can be considered a strength, it is suggested in this study that all three characteristics of counter-narrative articulation are realised in the case of women's NGOs working on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, that women's NGO engagement is reflective of these counter-narrative characteristics, as the participating organisations pursue a wide-range of transformation-aimed projects with diverse target groups, supports this finding.

²² The vote was initially schedule for 27 June 2023, but was pushed back to the autumn after much backlash from the international community as well as local civil society organisation, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/06/28/tumonbaev-zakonoproekt-ob-inoagentah-otlozhili-do-oseni/#>

The articulation of women's NGO counter-narratives, however, is subjected to current societal pressure from various actors in Kyrgyzstan. Organisations are thus able to pursue these narratives to the extent that they are able to operate on the ground. Were the environment to grow completely closed to civil society, women's NGO counter-narratives would no longer be able to be articulated, at least not from within the country.

8. Conclusion

Framed around the developing field of counter-narrative theory and its three key theoretical features, this study analysed women's NGO narratives on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan based on nine interviews with seven Bishkek-based organisations. Through a narrative inquiry methodological approach, this thesis aimed at revealing how women's NGOs as social actors position themselves on the issue at hand, as well as reveal what they do with these narratives and how. In doing so, it suggests that women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan working on the issue of bride kidnapping are a relatively homogenous group that articulate counter-narratives on the abduction of women for forced marriage.

In line with counter-narrative assumptions, the analysis exposed how participating NGOs 1) deconstruct the master-narrative of *tradition* by demonstrating its violence and highlighting the strong cultural context that supports conservative narratives justifying the practice. They instead argue bride kidnapping is a *crime* that should be named as such; 2) demonstrate broad social change-oriented objectives around the practice such as to raise awareness in society to the issue of bride kidnapping and increase intra-family communication, while inserting their work in a larger struggle to promote women's rights; and 3) target a wide-array of audiences, including the marginalised and oppressed group of women and girls, as well as the theoretically unexpected group of men and boys. This last point further exposed how the three characteristic features of counter-narratives theory gain from being considered as complementary, rather than independent and incompatible features. Indeed, the increasing engagement of participating women's NGOs with groups of men and boys to achieve their broad social transformative goals broadens the scope of target audiences prescribed by theoretical expectations and offers a richer understanding of the potential these counter-narrative actors can have.

The analysis, however, also highlighted the extent to which NGOs in Kyrgyzstan working on women's issues are challenged by a societal context of political crackdown on civil society and rise of Islamisation in the achievement of their transformational goals.

As one of the few studies on challenges to bride kidnapping, as well as studies on women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, the findings of this research insert themselves in the identified gaps in literature on this practice in the Central Asian country. It primarily reveals that an important part of women's NGO engagement is centred around changing the attitudes and behaviours of the population on this issue. This study finds that the NGOs interviewed acknowledge the

need to strengthen the legal framework and advocate for change at institutional levels, but that they, nevertheless, deem that change should come from those involved in and/or supporting the practice, namely the women and girls victims as well as the men, boys and women enacting and enforcing this ‘tradition’. Moreover, in the under-researched field of challenges to this practice, the main contribution of this study to the academic literature on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan is thus the establishment of women’s NGOs as actors of contestation and change on this issue. By doing so, this contribution also inserts itself within Bamberg and Wipf’s argument that counter-narratives represent yet untapped potential in the study of social change. Although the current limitations that challenge the work, and perhaps the very existence, of NGOs working on women’s issues can undermine their position as an actor of change, this study, overall, brings to the fore the up until now invisible social forces that are local women’s NGOs.

As the sample group of this thesis is small, future research could build on these contributions. Indeed, further assessment of the impact civil society organisations can have on changing attitudes and behaviours to reduce bride kidnapping is required. With more time and resources, building on the establishment of the NGOs interviewed as actors of change, the impact of counter-narratives could be further evaluated. Studying these structures from different frameworks, such as social movement theory, could for example not only further evaluate the social impact women’s NGOs can have on reducing the practice, but also on achieving their larger social transformational goals in regards to women’s rights in Kyrgyzstan. Other organisations, not specifically focusing on women but working on similar issues or topics related to retraditionalisation more broadly, could provide new insights into the counter-narrative element of their work. Finally, other narratives and groups could also be studied in the framework of counter-narrative theory. As an emerging theoretical framework, it allows for innovative research to be conducted on a variety of actors and issues.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: dates of interviews

Respondent A: interview conducted on 23 February 2023 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Respondent B: interview conducted on 3 March 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent C: interview conducted on 28 February 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent D: interview conducted on 24 February 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent E : interview conducted on 17 February, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent F: interview conducted on 16 February 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent G : interview conducted on 27 February 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent H: interview conducted on 22 February, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Respondent I: interview conducted on 21 February 2023, in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan

Appendix 2: Interview questions

General information about the NGO

- When was your NGO founded?
- How many people work in your NGO?

The nature of their work

- What are the goals of your organisation? What impact do you wish to have (at both the community and national levels)?
- How do you define women's rights?
- Where does your NGO place bride kidnapping in this definition? How important is bride kidnapping in your order of (work) priorities?
- Would you say the practice of bride kidnapping has increased in recent years?
- What is the nature of the work you have undertaken in relation to the promotion of women's rights, and against bride kidnapping more specifically?

Bride kidnapping and tradition

- As I understand it, bride kidnapping is perceived/justified by many in Kyrgyzstan as a tradition, how does your organisation feel about this?

- How ingrained would you say are the notions of gender and tradition in society, especially in the case of bride kidnapping? What does this mean in practice for women?

Positive developments and challenges

- How do you evaluate the success of your work? What impact has your work had?
- Can you cite some positive developments as a result of your engagement?
- What are the main challenges to your work/your objectives? (have these changed overtime?)
- To what extent do you think your work can contribute to change?
- Do you see improvements or setbacks in women's rights and freedoms in Kyrgyzstan, and more specifically regarding bride kidnapping?

Advocacy

- How do you engage with civil society ? What instruments for change do you use?
- Where do you get public support for your work and fights?
- Does your NGO engage with political institutions in Kyrgyzstan/internationally, and if so, how? Through what frameworks and for what purpose?

Appendix 3: Plain language statement



Plain Language Statement

Project title

Challenging narratives on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan: the case of Non-Governmental Organisations

Researcher details

Researcher: Lucie Tafforin- student of International Master in Central and Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian (IMCEERES) studies at the University of Glasgow and KIMEP University (Almaty, Kazakhstan). This research is undertaken for the researcher's Master thesis and according to Glasgow University's College of Social Sciences requirements.

Email: lucie.tafforin@kimep.kz

Supervisors: [Dinara Pisareva \(KIMEP\) d.pisareva@kimep.kz](mailto:d.pisareva@kimep.kz), and Federica Prina (University of Glasgow) federica.prina@glasgow.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide whether you want to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following frequently asked questions carefully and discuss them with others if you wish. Please ask me if you have any questions or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study aims to uncover how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Kyrgyzstan engage with the issue of bride kidnapping. It focuses on the different societal narratives surrounding this practice and researches the purpose with which NGOs engage with these narratives. The study aims to reveal the role of local NGOs in fighting bride kidnapping in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The study started in January 2022 and will be completed by August 2023. The field research, for which you are being invited, will take place between February and March 2023.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to participate in this study given your work with a Kyrgyz NGO. You have been contacted to take part through your organisation's contact information. As a leader or member of a local organisation, the insight you can provide me into your work and how you perceive your impact would be invaluable to the research aims. Around 10 leaders or members of Kyrgyz NGOs will be involved.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. Moreover, if you decide to take part in it you may still withdraw at any time and without explanation. In this case, your data will be immediately deleted and not used for the research. If you wish to withdraw from the study, you may contact me by email, preferably up to one month after the interview.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you accept to take part in this research study, I will interview you with the purpose of further understanding your work and the different programmes and projects your NGO has in place regarding bride kidnapping. All questions for the interview will be provided to you before the scheduled meeting, at which point you may decide to withdraw from the study. The interview is estimated to take up to one hour. Your participation in this study, or your withdrawal at any point, will not impact your employment and/or relationship with your organisation.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. No identifiable marker, such as your name or position, will be included. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and contact details removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. The entirety of the data

collected during this study will be stored in secured and digitally encrypted locations, before being securely destroyed after completion of the project.

However, it is important to note that there may be limitations to this promise of confidentiality, despite the name of your organisation not being disclosed in the project, given the small size of the research sample, as well as the focus of the research on NGOs and your occupation in this organisation.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The entirety of the collected data will be securely destroyed once the study is completed, and I am awarded my Master degree. The study is estimated to be completed by the end of August 2023 when the thesis will be submitted to the University of Glasgow. The degree is estimated to be awarded late November 2023. A copy or a summary of the published results will be sent to you as soon as it is available. As my Kazakh university has a requirement of a published article relating to the thesis, the data will be published in an academic article, but you will not be identified in any report or publication. This publication will take place during the time of the study.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is coordinated by the Universities of Glasgow and KIMEP in Almaty, Kazakhstan, as part of the joint IMCEERES programme.

Who has reviewed the study?

The project has been reviewed by Glasgow University's School of Social and Political Sciences' Ethics Forum.

Contact for Further Information

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the School of Social and Political Science Ethics Officer Professor Gerda Herth email: Gerda.Reith@glasgow.ac.uk

End. _____

Appendix 4: Participant consent form



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Challenging narratives on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan: the case of Non-Governmental Organisations

Name of Researcher: Lucie Tafforin

Supervisors: Dinara Pisareva (KIMEP University) and Federica Prina (University of Glasgow)

Please tick as appropriate

- Yes No I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Yes No I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- Yes No I understand that my participation will not impact my employment or relationship with my organisation.
- Yes No I consent to interviews being audio-recorded
- Yes No I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym and not identified by name in any publications.

I agree that:

- Yes No All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- Yes No The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Yes No The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- Yes No The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- Yes No I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- Yes No I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.
- Yes No I acknowledge that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee given the small size of the research sample, as well as the focus of the research on NGOs and your occupation in this organisation.
- Yes No I acknowledge that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee in the event that evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered.

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of Researcher Lucie Taffotin Signature

Date

Appendix 5: University of Glasgow ethical approval



Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

College of Social Sciences

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT_SPS_2022_323_IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Lucie Tafforin

Project Title: Challenging gendered (re)traditionalisation: Women's Non-Governmental Organisations and the case of bride-kidnapping in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 21/12/2022

Start Date of Approval 21/12/2022 End Date of Approval 23/11/2023

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

Approval Subject to Amendments means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

Amendments Subject to SEF should be submitted to ethics administrator.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE

REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE

ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

This is an improve application which addressed all the previous raised ethical issues.
Good luck with this research!

School of Social & Political Sciences
University of Glasgow

17 JAN 2023

Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any enquiries,
please email [School ethics email address](#)

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences
Glasgow G12 8QQ
The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

E-mail: [School ethics email address](#)

