How Can Studies of Non-Consensual Bride Abduction in Central Asia Inform Conversations about Sexual Assault on U.S. Campuses?

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Questions:

- What similarities exist between these two forms of gender-based violence?
- How have these forms of gender-based violence been reinforced by culturally shared beliefs and institutional practices?
- How can legal and institutional changes make a difference in addressing these issues?

Similarities:

In my experience, Western audiences are fairly disturbed when I describe my research on non-consensual bride abduction in Central Asia, yet relatively immune to hearing about the problem of sexual assault on U.S. college campuses. These two forms of gender-based violence actually have a lot more in common than one might expect.

Legal Framework and Institutional Practices:

There are many ways that the legal framework and/or institutional practices CAN disadvantage women, including:

- Attitudes of law enforcement officials (and university officials) that discourage victims from reporting or pursuing legal and disciplinary actions;
- Investigative processes that tend to protect perpetrators and “re-victimize” victims;
- Corruption (and perceptions of corruption) within the legal system.

These issues help explain why so few cases are reported, and why even fewer cases are resolved in favor of the victim.

One Key Difference:

In both settings, these forms of gender-based violence are in the midst of change, but changes are heading in different directions.

- Central Asia. Post-Soviet governments are less supportive of Soviet-era policies that promoted gender equity. Laws intended to protect women are not enforced, while society increasingly reinforces “kidnap myths.” And, in Kyrgyzstan, women who resist these marriages and activists who challenge the practice are increasingly viewed as traitors to their ethnicity.

- United States. Popular beliefs and social attitudes that reinforce a rape-supportive culture are being challenged by the Title IX movement. Universities, such as Texas A&M, are introducing new victim-centered procedures for handling sexual assault cases, and developing educational programs, such as Texas A&M’s programs that emphasize bystander intervention.

Mechanisms that Reinforce Gender-Based Violence:

Both forms of gender-based violence have been reinforced by:

- (1) widely held beliefs and attitudes that place the blame on victims, excuse the actions of perpetrators, or blur the lines between non-consensual and consensual acts; and
- (2) legal and institutional practices that disadvantage those who pursue legal recourse.

Moreover, legal acceptance of gender-based violence and social acceptance of gender-based violence serve to mutually reinforce each other.

Rape Myths and Kidnap Myths:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rape Myths</th>
<th>Kidnap Myths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only bad girls get raped.</td>
<td>Only bad girls return home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women lie about being raped.</td>
<td>Women pretend to be upset when they are kidnapped.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It wasn’t really rape.</td>
<td>The kidnapping was consensual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She wanted it.</td>
<td>Women will eventually be happy with the marriage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men are sexually aggressive by nature.</td>
<td>Kidnapping is a national tradition (in Kyrgyzstan).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He didn’t mean to do it.</td>
<td>He’s a nice guy. He’ll be a good husband.</td>
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Social Attitudes and Expectations

Legal Framework and Institutional Practices