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Elzat Kazakbaeva (left) and Aida Sooronbaeva (right), bride kidnapping survivors, wait in the backstage for a fashion show organized by fashion designer Zamira Moldosheva, part of a public movement against bride kidnapping and domestic violence, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.



Kyrgyz brides and bridegrooms pray in the central mosque during a mass wedding ceremony in the capital Bishkek. — Reuters photos

Kyrgyzstan's kidnapped brides use fashion and flags to end marriage taboo

Walking proudly down a catwalk, the lights and glamour seemed like a lifetime away from Elzat Kazakbaeva's nightmare ordeal five years ago when she was grabbed off a Kyrgyzstan street by a group of men wanting to marry her to an uninvited suitor. Kazakbaeva is one of thousands of women abducted and forced to marry each year in the former Soviet republic in Central Asia where bride kidnappings continue, particularly in rural areas. Bride kidnapping - which also occurs in nations like Armenia, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan - was outlawed in 2013 in Kyrgyzstan where authorities recognized it could lead to marital rape, domestic violence, and psychological trauma.

But some communities still see it as a pre-Soviet tradition dating back to tribal prestige, said Russell Kleinbach, professor emeritus of sociology at Philadelphia University and co-founder of women's advocacy group Kyz Korgon Institute. Now a new generation of women are eschewing acceptance of this abuse, with their campaign escalating in 2018 when one kidnapped bride, Buralai Turdaaly Kyzy, 20, was put in the same police cell as the man who abducted her - and stabbed to death. Her killer was jailed for 20 years but her murder sparked national outrage and protests against bride kidnappings in a country where campaigners said tougher sentences were handed down for kidnapping livestock than women until recently.

Fashion designer Zamira Moldosheva is part of a rising public movement against bride kidnapping which has ranged from charity bike rides to flag installations with campaigners saying more events would be planned this year. She organized a fashion show featuring only women who had been abused or kidnapped, dressed as historical Kyrgyz women. "Can't we women do something against the violence taking place in our country?" Moldosheva said in an interview in Bishkek, the capital of the majority Muslim nation of six million people. "Bride kidnapping is not our tradition - it should be stopped," she said, adding that bride kidnapping was a form of forced marriage and not a traditional practice.

Myth not tradition

Kazakbaeva, one of 12 models in the fashion show, said she was glad to participate in the event last October to highlight her ordeal and encourage other women to flee forced marriages. Kazakbaeva, then a student aged 19, was ambushed in broad daylight on a Saturday afternoon outside her college dormitory in Bishkek and forced into a waiting car by a group of men. "I felt as if I was an animal," Kazakbaeva told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, her faced streaked with tears. "I couldn't move or do anything at all."

Kazakbaeva was taken to the groom's home in rural Issyk Kul region, about 200 km (125 miles) east of Bishkek, where she was dressed in white and taken into a decorated room for an impending ceremony. She spent hours pleading with the groom's family - and her own - to stop the forced marriage. "My grandmother is very traditional, she thought it would be a shame and she started convincing me to stay," said Kazakbaeva. When her mother threatened

to call the police, the groom's family finally let her go.

She was lucky to escape unwed, she said, and hoped the fashion show, depicting historical female figures, would help to bring the taboo subject to the fore. "Women nowadays can also be the characters of new fairy tales for others," said Kazakbaeva, dressed as a female freedom fighter from ancient Kyrgyzstan, which gained independence from Moscow in 1991. "I'm fighting for women's rights."

Women suppressing women

Kyrgyzstan toughened laws against bride kidnapping in 2013, making it punishable by up to 10 years in prison, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which said it was a "myth" that the practice was ever part of the culture. In a handful of cases the kidnappings are consensual, said Kleinbach, especially in poorer communities where the practice was akin to eloping to save costs of a ceremony or hefty dowry.

A UNDP spokeswoman said data was scant on the number of women abducted each year as many women did not report the crime through fear but they estimate about 14 percent of women aged under 24 are still married through some form of coercion. "They don't want to report, this is the issue," Umutai Dauletova, gender coordinator at the UNDP in Kyrgyzstan, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Dauletova said most cases did not make it to court as women retracted their statements, often under pressure from female family members, fearing public shaming for disobedience or no longer being a virgin. "This is the phenomenon of women suppressing other women," she said.

Breaking taboos

Aida Sooronbaeva, 35, was not as fortunate as Kazakbaeva. Back from school, aged 17, she found her grandfather tied up and her home smashed up so she hid until her brother tricked her to seek refuge with a friend whose family kidnapped her. Initially she refused to marry their son and tried to escape but she said she was eventually worn down by social pressure in her village and was married for 16 years despite domestic abuse. "He kept me at home, never letting me out, just in the yard," said Sooronbaeva, exposing scars on her neck and stomach. "I lived with him only for the sake of my children."

But a few years ago, the violence got so bad that she ran into the street where she was rescued by a passer-by and she finally plucked up the courage to leave her husband. She said she hoped speaking out, and taking part in campaigns like the fashion show, would break the taboos surrounding forced marriage. "Now I perceive any man as an enemy. I never even think of getting remarried," said Sooronbaeva, adorned in heavy jewellery and colourful make-up. But she added, with a note of optimism: "Women are strong, we can survive." — Reuters

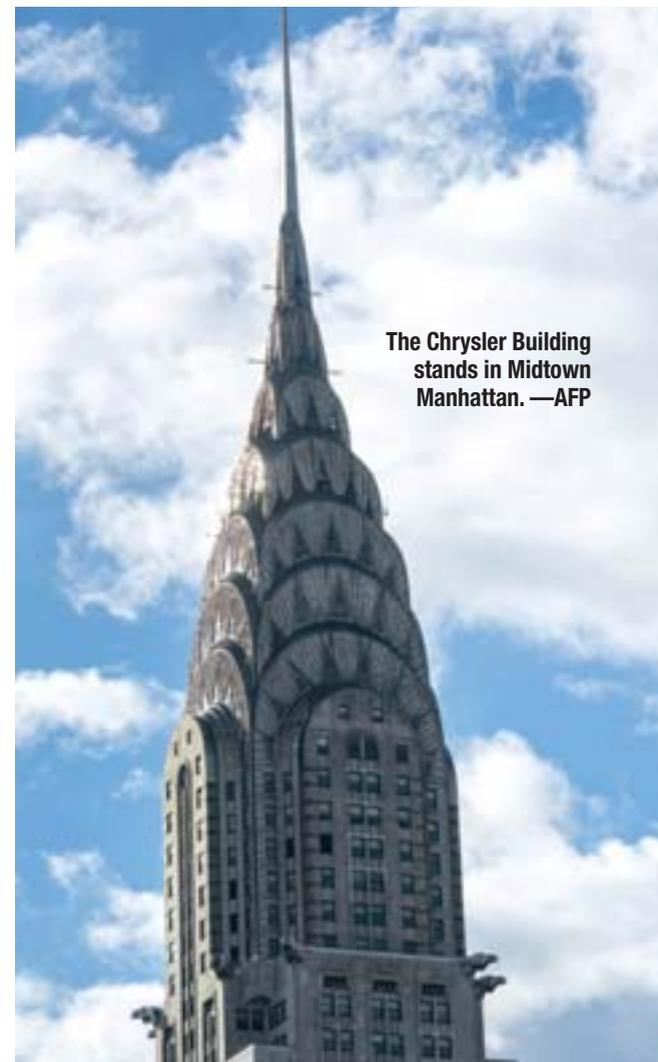
New York's iconic Chrysler Building up for sale

The Chrysler Building, one of the most iconic structures in New York, has been put up for sale by its owners, Emirati investment firm Mubadala and real estate group Tishman Speyer. The owners did not set a selling price, a source close to the sale told AFP on condition of anonymity, confirming a report that was first published in The Wall Street Journal. The building in midtown Manhattan, considered an Art Deco masterpiece, was acquired in 2008 by Mubadala, which paid \$800 million for a 90 percent stake.

Tishman Speyer, which had bought the building outright for a reported \$210-250 million in 1997, retained a 10 percent stake. Neither firm would offer a comment when contacted by AFP. Tishman Speyer has hired real estate group CBRE to manage the sale of the building at the intersection of 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue. The announcement comes at a difficult time for the New York real estate market, especially in Manhattan. Development of the Hudson Yards neighborhood, on Manhattan's West Side, will soon be complete, with more than 1.6 million square meters of new office and residential space.

That has driven prices down even further for older buildings. Another factor for potential buyers to consider: the land on which the Chrysler Building stands is one-third owned by Cooper Union, a private university. In 1997, Tishman Speyer negotiated a long-term lease with the university that ran through 2147. That deal called for the annual rent to rise from \$7.8 million in 2017 to \$32.5 million from 2019-2027, according to documents seen by AFP. The value of the land alone was estimated at \$679 million in late 2017.

The Chrysler Building, which opened in 1930, stands 1,046 feet (319 meters) tall. It was the world's tallest building, but only for 11 months, when it was dethroned by the Empire State Building, also in Manhattan. The building was a personal project for Walter Chrysler, the founder of the car manufacturer that bears his name, but remained separate from the auto business. — AFP



The Chrysler Building stands in Midtown Manhattan. —AFP