

# I AM JAMILIA

project by Irina Unruh (Kyrgyzstan)

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'A good marriage starts with tears,' says a famous Kyrgyz proverb. Although I am originally from Kyrgyzstan, I began to understand the deep meaning behind this famous Kyrgyz proverb and the depth of the wounded souls they often leave when I met Jamilia in a small village in Kyrgyzstan. She is named after the main character from the worldwide known novel "Jamilia" by Chingiz Aitmatov. It is a story of two young lovers who leave their village and break a strong tradition to live together – a story which tells with melancholy and full of tenderness the power of love that overrides everything.

I grew up with the awareness of "Ala Kachuu," which, if translated literally, means "grab and run." It is a common custom of bride kidnapping. Some best friends of my own mother's were kidnapped to get married already during Soviet time. She remembers clearly how her friends suffered after this fate.

When I was 9 in 1988, my family immigrated to Germany. I visited Kyrgyzstan in 2008 for the first time and was sure that the custom of Ala Kachuu doesn't exist anymore. I believed it belonged to the past, like the Soviet Union. Only when I met Jamilia, I understood, she was one of the still many victims of Ala Kachuu. According to Kyrgyzstan's latest available data annually, around 12.000 to 15.000 women are kidnapped to be married.

My origins and my mother's narratives have led me to make my journey and face this issue. I started to interview and to portray women from different parts of Kyrgyzstan to tell their personal stories. To better understand the custom and see if, by leaving the country, one is free of its implications, I have met five Kyrgyz women who left Kyrgyzstan and are making careers in Germany. They all feel responsible for the country of their origin and are role models for other Kyrgyz women. All of them use technology to encourage and empower young women in Kyrgyzstan.

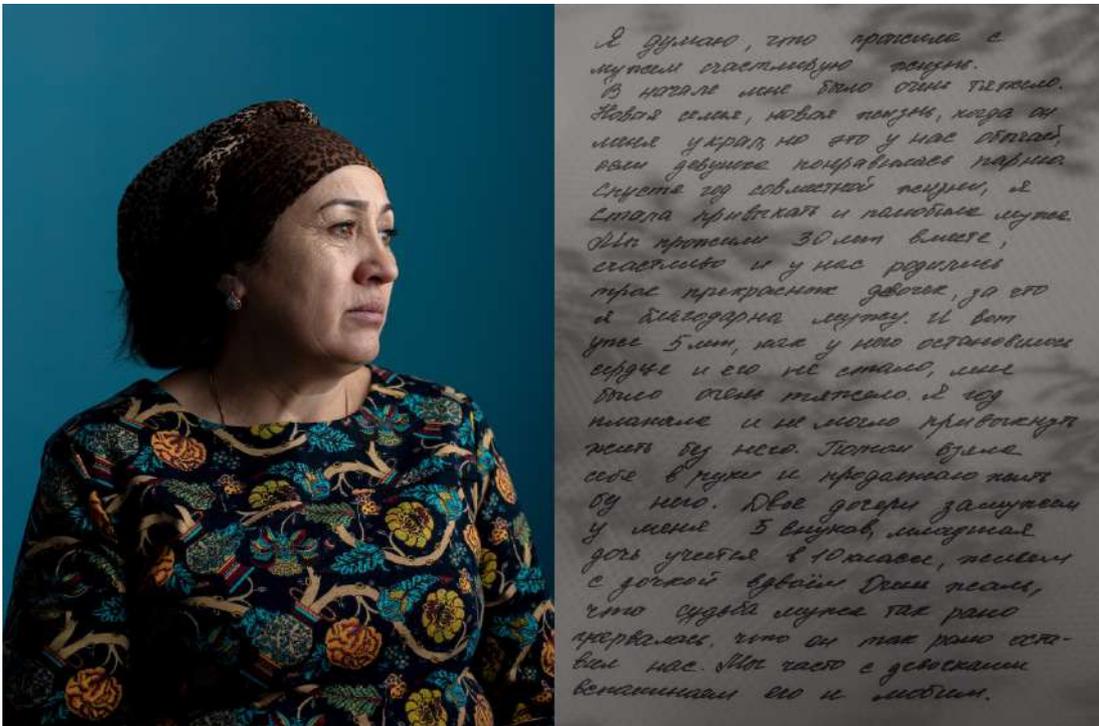
Like women in Kyrgyzstan, also those I have met in Germany have their own unique personal stories. But what unites them is an urge to move on and break away from traditions that limit them. "I never expected to be today where I am,"- told me, one woman I photographed for that project. But I always wanted to be free and to make my own decisions. Like Jamilia, also I broke our traditions and left Kyrgyzstan."



The story of the 20-year old medical student Burulaj that occurred in May 2018 is a reminder of what an immense tragedy Ala Kachuu is. Her abductor stabbed her to death in a police station, where she came to file a report against him and seek protection. Her portrait as a mural is placed on the Bishkek Medical College facade, where the deceased studied.



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“I think my life with my husband was happy. But in the beginning, it was tough. A new family, a new life, when he kidnapped me, but it was our tradition. If a man likes a woman, he kidnapped her. After one hard year of living together, I started to get used to him and love my husband. We lived happily 30 years together and have three beautiful girls. I am grateful to my husband for our girls. Five years ago, we lost him, and it was challenging for me. I cried almost for one year and could not get used to life without him. Afterward, I retook courage and continued to live without him. Two of my daughters are married at their own choice. I have five grandchildren. My youngest daughter is a pupil of 10th grade at school. I live with my youngest daughter. It is such a pity that my husband left us so early. We remember him very often and love him.”



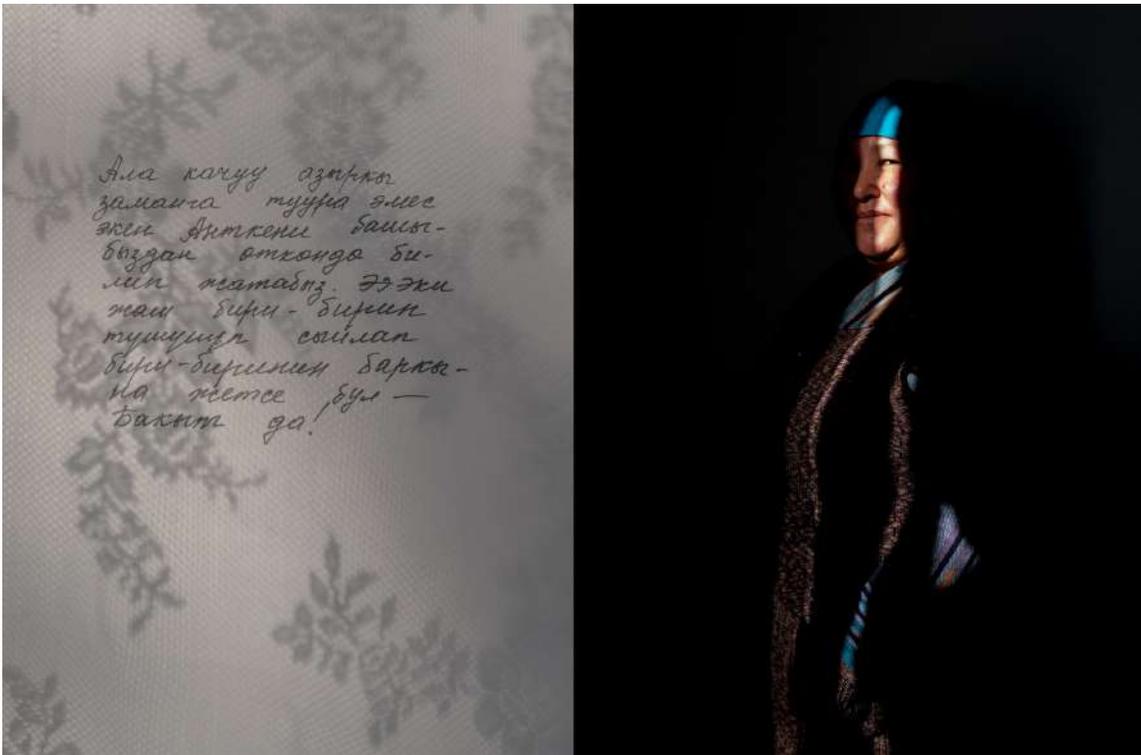
Gulzina’s family left Kyrgyzstan for Moscow when she was young. It was crucial to her parents that Gulzina received a good education. She recalls her visits to Kyrgyzstan as a teenager. While she wondered what she would like to study, her former classmates talked about what it would be like to be married and have a family soon. Gulzina continued to study in Europe and, since graduating, worked and lived in several countries. For the last two years, she settled in Berlin. She believes that it is essential that parents are committed to their children’s education, particularly girls.



The shoes of a little girl are in the entrance area of the kindergarten.



Alina (19 years) is standing in her first rented apartment in Bishkek. Since March 2018, she has belonged to a team of young Kyrgyz women who started engineering training and lessons on basic programming, soldering, and prototyping. Alina is taking part in the first Kyrgyz Space program to build the CubeSat for Kyrgyzstan. International attention and support for the program were initiated mainly by a journalist Bektour Iskender, a Senior TED Fellow and co-founder of the citizen journalism outlet Kloop.kg. For him, "The Kyrgyz Space Program as a girls-only project helps to fight gender stereotypes and give girls a chance to make history."



Ала качуу азирке  
заманга туура эмес  
эки Айткени байыт-  
боздон атканда би-  
леп жатабыз. Ээки  
наш бичи-бичи  
тушундуу сайлап  
бичи-бичилеги барка-  
на жетсе буу —  
Бахит да!

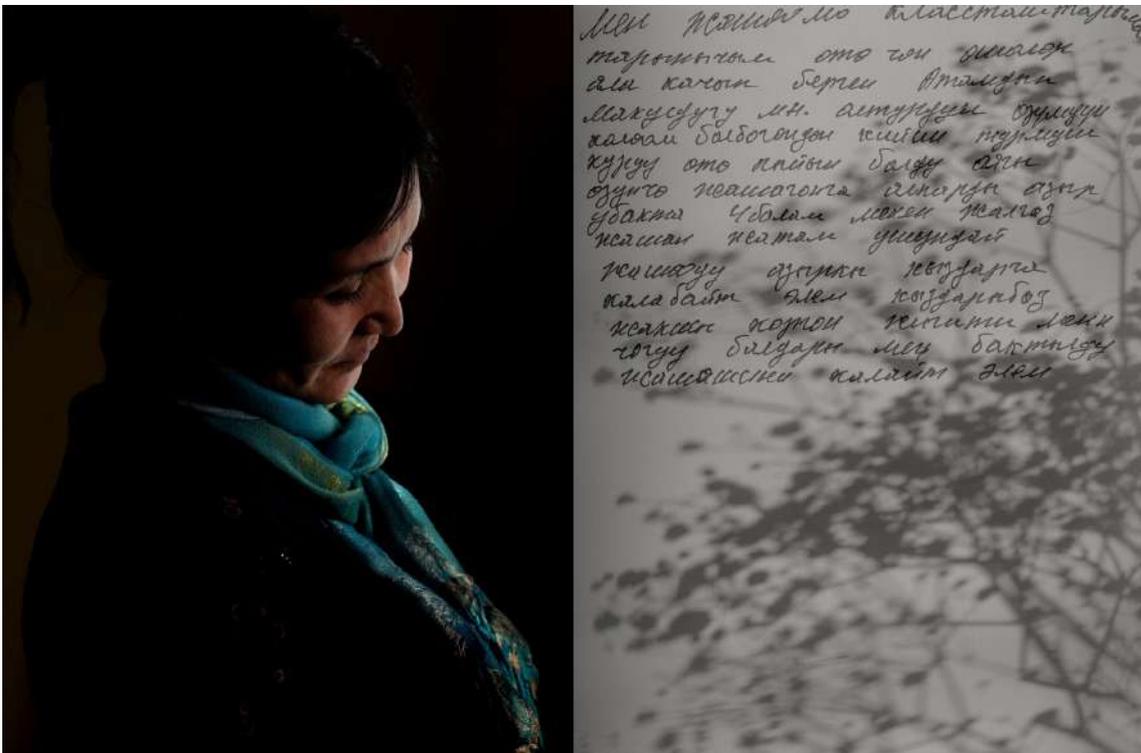
“Ala Kachuu is not appropriate for modern life. Because we have experienced it, we instantly know that a young couple should know, respect, and appreciate each other. This is real happiness!”



Clothes hang on the wall in a small room of a 37-year-old woman who became a victim of the practice “Ala Kachuu” more than a decade ago. She lives alone in a small apartment. Her neighbors can not see that she is not doing well, being an invalid unable to work.  
“He liked me, the man who kidnapped me, but I DID NOT like him. (..) After (the kidnapping), I took some pills, fell into a coma, and became an invalid (chronic emotional distress). I want to ask him – How is your life going? My life is broken...I am lonely... Sick...”



Ala Kachuu is wrongly interpreted as a Kyrgyz tradition, a sign of national identity, even though it is not compatible with Islam or the nomadic culture. Traditionally when two young were in love, and the groom could not pay the dowry to the bride's family, the two young people in love used to agree to organize a kidnapping themselves. In modern times, this is uncommon, and bride kidnapping is simply violence against women.



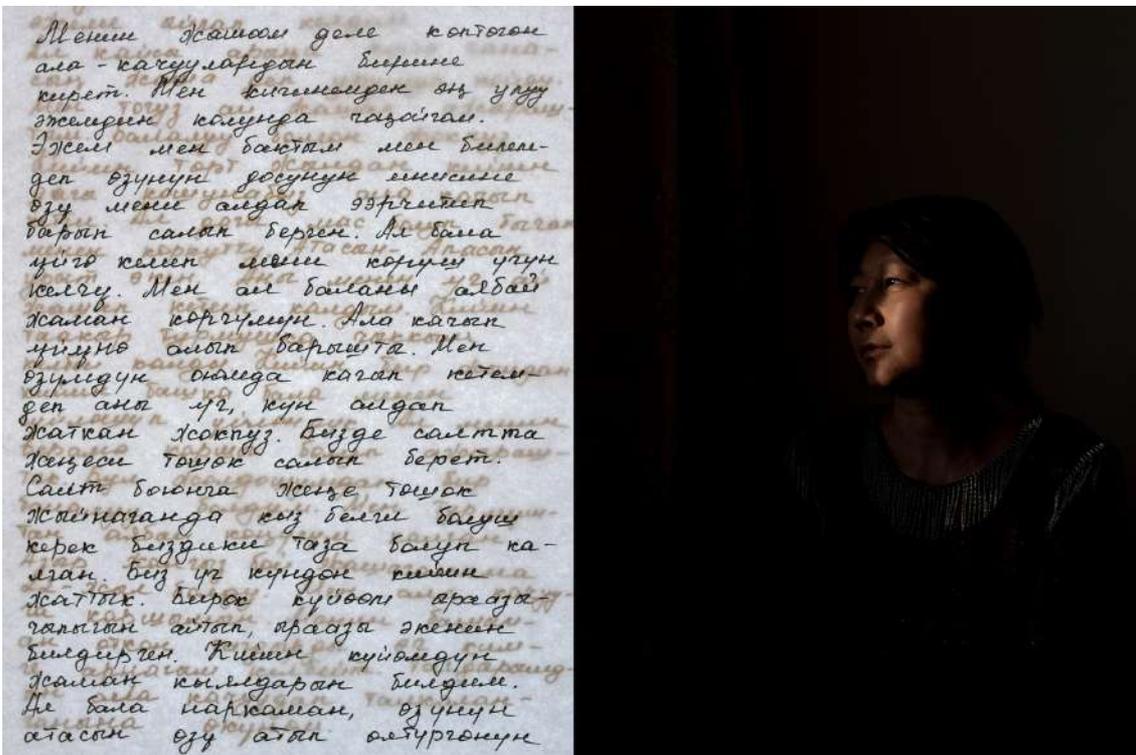
"I am dissatisfied with my life and disappointed with my classmates. They supported the man who kidnapped me. My father agreed to my forced marriage, so I had to stay there. But I didn't want to stay. It was so tense to live together. Ultimately, we divorced. At the moment, I live with my four children separately. I don't wish any other woman life like mine. I wish young girls a happy life together with their beloved and children."



Mahabat looks at pictures from her childhood. She is originally from a small village in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, where she grew up with her grandparents. They were shepherds and took care of her. As a teenager, she moved to Bishkek to attend school. After studying in the capital Bishkek, she went to Germany for her master's degree in German language and political science. Currently, she is working as a scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. She is also a German-Kyrgyz Cultural Association board chairwoman and is involved in various social projects in Kyrgyzstan. She advocates for girls' education as the only way to break away from dependency on others, which often leads to helplessness, physical, sexual, and emotional violence.



"The right to education is a fundamental right. Unfortunately, not everyone has access to it. This affects many girls. Some lack funds, other parental support, and sometimes there are social and cultural barriers. (..) Education allows us to live an independent life, allows taking fate into our own hands, makes independent decisions. (..) For me, an educated woman is a strong woman, and a strong woman can be a foundation of a stable family, become an equal life partner, and raise self-confident children. A strong woman contributes to the development of science, politics, economics, and the arts, thereby building a strong society. That is why I believe that the best place for a young woman is at the university, and all sides should support her." It often happens that young, abducted women commit suicide shortly after their forced marriage. The official figures are unknown. View for cemetery on the outskirts of Bishkek.



"My life was also ruined throughout Ala Kachuu, like the life of many other girls and women in our country. In my childhood, I was brought up by my elder sister. As she brought me up, my sister decided everything for me.

She lied to me and agreed to kidnap me by the younger brother of her friend. In the beginning, this young man visited us to see me. I did not like him at all. But he kidnapped me and brought me to his home. I thought I could run away from him. Through lies, I reached that we haven't had our wedding night in the first three days. According to our traditions, the aunt of my husband should check our bedsheet after our wedding night. But after the third day, we had the wedding night. But the bedsheet remained clean. My husband accepted it. After a while, I learned about his bad habits.

I found out not only that he was drug-addicted. I also found out about a family secret. He shot and killed his father. I returned to my sister crying and saying that I would no longer live with him. She scolded me, saying that I shouldn't be picky with a husband and have to live with him. After nine months, we got divorced. Fortunately, I didn't get a child from him. After four years, I was kidnapped once again by my neighbor. He was drunk and threatened me with a knife. I found out that he beats both his parents, his mother, and his father. After three months, I abandoned him. Afterward, I had no wish to get married anymore. One year later, I met another man, and we got married. But we also got divorced because he was against my religion. We have one child. I have lost interest in life. For almost 22 years, I have been living alone. I am against bride kidnapping. I wish no one such an experience as I had. I regret that my life has been ruined because of Ala Kachuu."

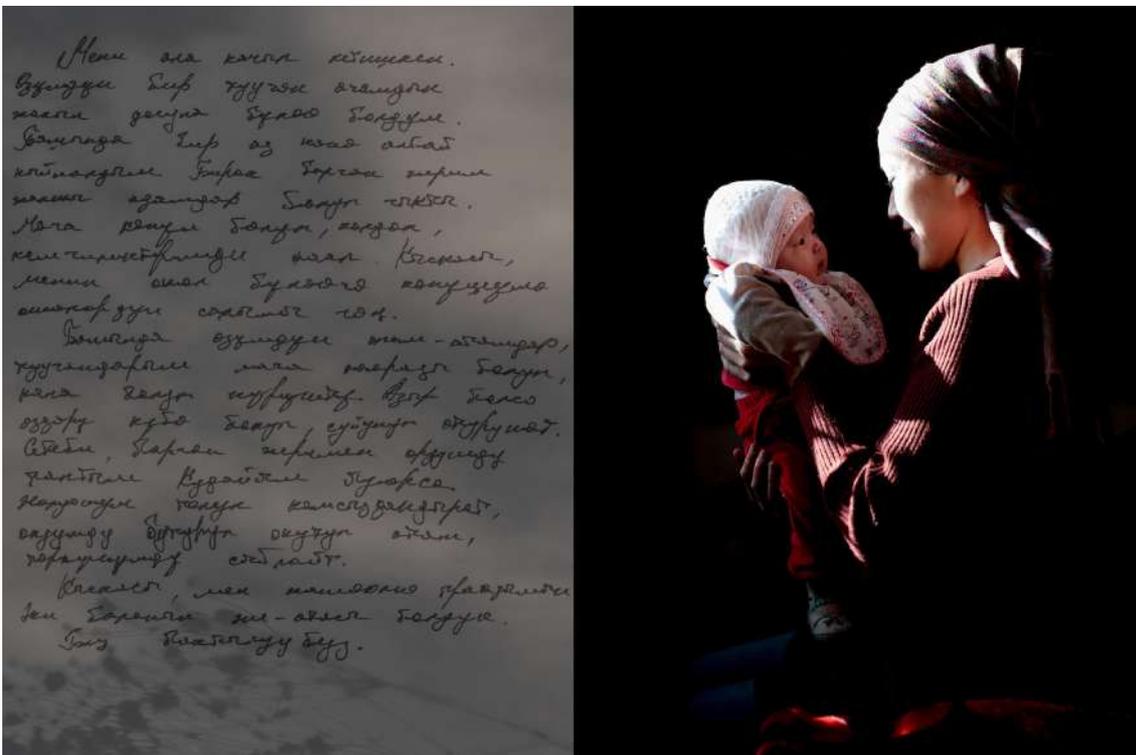


Kyma is currently working from home in Berlin due to Covid-19. She is a bank employee and has lived in Germany since 2008. She maintains close contact with family and friends back in her home country.

She came to Germany as a young woman and stayed because of the opportunities and freedom to lead a self-determined life. She cares to encourages young Kyrgyz women to pursue their dreams and desires. Kyrgyz television made a report about her life in Germany recently. She has been living with her Italian partner for several years. The plan is to get married in Italy next year.



A soviet era housing project in Bishkek.



“My brother’s friend kidnapped me. In the beginning, I could not get used to him and his family, but I found his family very beautiful. They were attentive to me and supported me. They helped me to get used to him as well.

At first, my family and relatives were upset with me that I decided to stay. And now they see my life and are happy for me because I became part of this family. Thank God my husband takes good care of me financially. He agreed that I could continue my university education and paid money for it. Also, he respects my family. In short, I am momentarily grateful for my life. We are the parents of two children. We are happy.”

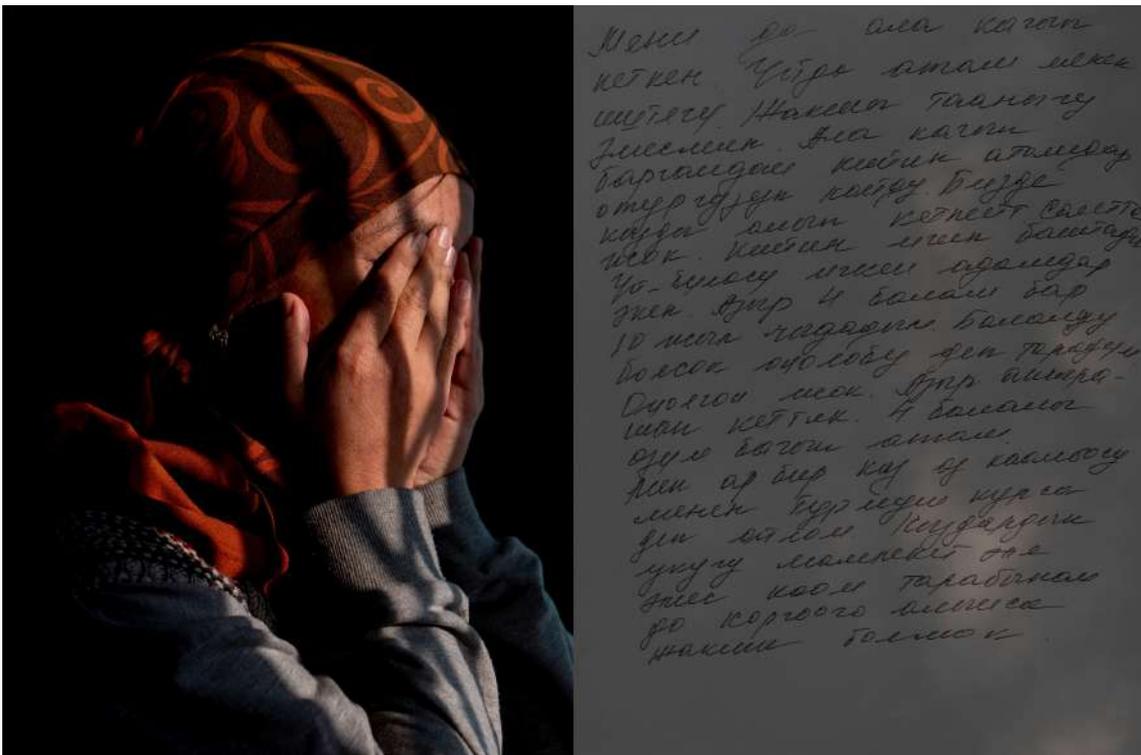


Ak-Bermet sits in the living room at home, where she now works. She is an engineer and the first time she came to Germany to work as an Au-pair many years ago. Later she returned to Germany to study and met her current husband there. “We are a completely international family. My husband’s parents are from Greece and Poland, he was born here in Germany, and I am from Kyrgyzstan.”

She started a YouTube channel with another Kyrgyz woman to encourage and empower young people back in Kyrgyzstan. Many young persons contact them and ask for advice on creating their path within the existing structures.



A contemporary bedroom in Kyrgyzstan in the house of a family in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan.



"I was also kidnapped. He worked with my father at home. I didn't know him well. After being kidnapped, my father forced me to stay with him. Because according to our tradition, a girl can't return to her home after an abduction. He started to drink. I found out that his whole family drinks alcohol. Now I have four children. I suffered for ten years. I expected the children would help him get rid of his bad habit, but it didn't happen. Finally, we divorced, and now I take care of my children by myself. I wished every girl would marry at her own choice and desire. It would be better if women's rights were protected not only by the government but also by society."



Aksana has lived in Germany with her husband and children for more than ten years. But she is in close contact with her family, friends, and Kyrgyzstan for her work for ZMO, a research institute devoted to interdisciplinary studies of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In her opinion, women's role in Kyrgyz society needs to be redefined.



'A good marriage starts with tears,' says a famous Kyrgyz proverb. I see a glimpse of hope for a new interpretation of it for the new generation: tears of love.