

Structural Drivers of Child Abduction and Exploitation in Central Asia (2015–2025): A Multi-Indicator Analysis of Five Post-Soviet States

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ABSTRACT

Child abduction is routinely treated as a discrete criminal event, investigated and counted one case at a time. This paper argues that, in Central Asia, such a framing obscures more than it reveals, because the conditions under which a child is abducted, forcibly married, or trafficked are shaped by durable structural features of the region rather than by isolated offenders alone. The study asks how four structural conditions—poverty and labour migration, weak child-protection and institutional capacity, gendered social norms, and rapid digital transformation—are distributed across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan between 2015 and 2025, and how they are associated with children’s vulnerability to abduction and exploitation.

Because directly comparable annual statistics on child kidnapping do not exist for all five states, the paper uses a transparent, secondary multi-indicator design that places institutional trafficking assessments, forced- and child-marriage prevalence, documented bride-kidnapping estimates, and structural indicators of migration and digital exposure side by side, without treating any one of them as a proxy for the others. Each indicator is read as a measure of a structural condition associated with vulnerability, not as a direct count of abduction.

Three findings stand out. First, the region is internally divided: internet penetration ranged from roughly 92 percent in Kazakhstan to under 42 percent in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in early 2024, while remittances reached about 45 percent of GDP in Tajikistan, indicating sharply different structural environments. Second, the gap between recorded and estimated cases is severe; Kyrgyz authorities documented 895 bride-kidnapping cases across 2013–2018, whereas non-governmental estimates place annual abductions for marriage nearer 12,000. Third, legal reform can move official numbers dramatically without necessarily ending the underlying practice.

The paper’s contribution is to integrate security, legal, anthropological, and institutional literatures into a single structural account, to hold the concepts of kidnapping, abduction, trafficking, and exploitation analytically apart, and to treat the region’s measurement gap as a finding in its own right rather than a

limitation to be apologised for. In doing so it specifies the data infrastructure that a credible structural account of child vulnerability in Central Asia would require.

Keywords: *child abduction; child trafficking; bride kidnapping; Central Asia; structural vulnerability; child protection*

INTRODUCTION

The risk that a child in Central Asia will be abducted, forced into marriage, or drawn into an exploitative labour or sexual arrangement is not distributed randomly across the population. It concentrates where poverty, labour migration, weak institutions, and gendered social expectations overlap. This paper takes that concentration as its central observation and argues that child abduction and exploitation in the region between 2015 and 2025 are best understood as outcomes associated with structural vulnerability rather than as a series of unconnected criminal incidents.

The distinction matters for how the problem is measured, explained, and addressed. An incident-based framing directs attention toward individual offenders and prosecutions; a structural framing directs it toward the conditions that repeatedly place children within reach of those offenders. The two framings are not in competition, but they call for different data and different responses, and the second has been comparatively neglected in work on Central Asia.

Globally, the scale of child exploitation remains substantial even where headline categories differ. The International Labour Organization and UNICEF estimated that 138 million children were in child labour in 2024, following a 2020 estimate of 160 million that had marked the first increase in two decades (International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that the number of detected trafficking victims worldwide rose 25 percent in 2022 compared with 2019, that detected child victims increased by 31 percent, that the number of detected girls rose 38 percent, and that women and girls together accounted for 61 percent of all detected victims, most girls being trafficked for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2024). These figures establish that the exploitation of children is both large in scale and, on several measures, worsening.

They also illustrate a recurring problem for research on abduction: the most robust global data describe trafficking and labour, not abduction as such, and they are shaped by how vigorously states detect and record cases. This is the first sign of a theme that runs through the paper—that what can be said about child vulnerability in the region is tightly constrained by what its measurement systems capture.

Central Asia warrants specific attention within this global picture for reasons that are demographic, economic, and institutional. The five post-Soviet republics share a recent history of state formation, uneven economic transition, and large-scale labour migration, yet they diverge sharply in wealth, connectivity, and administrative capacity. They sit along established trafficking and migration corridors linking South Asia, Russia, and the Gulf, and several combine young populations with limited child-protection infrastructure.

The economic centre of gravity for millions of families lies outside their borders: labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan sustains households across Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, so that a large share of children grow up for part of the year with one or both parents absent. This arrangement, combined with post-Soviet transitions that left welfare and monitoring systems weakened, is associated with precisely the guardianship gaps that theories of victimisation identify as decisive. The claim here is one of association and plausible mechanism, not of established causation: the data show that these conditions co-occur with the settings in which children are known to be vulnerable, not that any single condition raises a measured abduction rate.

At the same time, the region contains forms of child abduction that have no straightforward analogue elsewhere, most notably the abduction of adolescent girls for marriage, which cannot be captured by trafficking statistics and which foregrounds the need to separate abduction analytically from trafficking. The coexistence of a modern digital economy in some states and customary abduction practices in others makes Central Asia an unusually revealing setting for a structural analysis, because the same decade contains very different mechanisms of risk.

That conceptual separation is the core of the paper. Kidnapping and abduction refer to the unlawful taking or holding of a person; trafficking additionally requires an element of movement or harbouring combined with an intended purpose of exploitation; and exploitation denotes that end purpose, whether sexual, marital, or labour-related. These categories overlap in practice—an abducted girl may subsequently be exploited, and a trafficked child is often first abducted—but they are not interchangeable. Treating a trafficking figure as though it measured kidnapping produces category errors that this study is explicitly designed to avoid.

Distinguishing them also clarifies why the region's data are so uneven: trafficking is monitored through international frameworks, whereas abduction and forced marriage are recorded, if at all, through domestic systems of very different quality. The measurement gap, in other words, is partly a by-product of how the categories map onto institutions.

The decade from 2015 to 2025 is an appropriate frame because it captures a period of rapid and uneven change in exactly the conditions that theory identifies as drivers of vulnerability. Across these years internet access expanded dramatically but unequally, labour migration deepened the economic dependence of several states on remittances, and the economic shock surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic around 2020 intensified household precarity. Treating the decade as the unit of analysis allows the study to relate changes in structural conditions to changes in the environments in which children become vulnerable, while stopping short of claiming a continuous annual trend in abduction itself, for which reliable regional data do not exist.

Existing scholarship has not brought these elements together. Research on Central Asia has examined trafficking as a security question (Jackson, 2006), the legal and institutional architecture of anti-trafficking policy (Dyussenova et al., 2024; Batyrbekova et al., 2025), and, in a separate anthropological literature, the practice of bride kidnapping (Kleinbach et al., 2005; Werner, 2009). These bodies of work rarely speak to one another. The security and legal literatures seldom engage the gendered

and household-level dynamics that anthropologists document, while the anthropological literature seldom situates bride kidnapping within the broader structural conditions that also shape trafficking and labour exploitation.

The result is a research gap: no existing study integrates trafficking, forced marriage, and abduction into a single structural account of child vulnerability across all five Central Asian states, or confronts directly the fact that the phenomenon of interest is poorly measured. This paper addresses that gap and makes three contributions. Empirically, it assembles and compares verifiable structural indicators—institutional trafficking assessments, forced- and child-marriage prevalence, bride-kidnapping estimates, and measures of migration and digital exposure—for the five states across the decade. Conceptually, it insists on distinguishing kidnapping, abduction, trafficking, and exploitation, and shows why that distinction is necessary given the available evidence. Methodologically, it treats the absence of direct kidnapping data not as a reason to abandon the question but as a finding in its own right, demonstrating how a multi-indicator design can characterise risk when direct measurement is impossible.

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature, sets out the multi-indicator design and its limitations, presents the comparative evidence, interprets it against prior scholarship, and concludes with the study's contribution and its implications for data and child-protection policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship relevant to child abduction and exploitation in Central Asia is spread across several fields that have developed largely in parallel: a security and international-relations literature on trafficking, a legal and criminological literature on anti-trafficking policy, an anthropological literature on marriage and abduction, and a body of institutional research on child labour, migration, and child protection. Reading them together, rather than in isolation, is what allows the research gap to be specified.

Security and Legal Framings of Trafficking

The security framing of trafficking in the region is most influentially set out by Jackson (2006), who shows how, after independence, trafficking and narcotics were folded together by governments and international organisations into a single securitised threat. Her analysis is valuable for explaining why state responses have often prioritised border control and organised crime over the protection of individual victims, but its unit of analysis is the state and the international system, not the child, and it does not track how vulnerability is produced within households.

More recent legal scholarship narrows the focus to policy design. Dyussenova et al. (2024) provide a documentary analysis of transnational trafficking across Central Asia and demonstrate that anti-trafficking capacity varies considerably between states, while Batyrbekova et al. (2025) identify socio-economic and institutional weaknesses as causes of child trafficking and evaluate the legal mechanisms available to counter it. These studies agree with Jackson that institutional capacity is decisive, but they extend her account by locating causation partly in economic and family conditions. Where they remain limited, for the purposes of the present study, is in method and scope: both approach the problem primarily through

law and prevention, treat trafficking largely as a single category, and do not systematically compare structural conditions across all five states or across time.

Institutional Measurement of Child Labour and Trafficking

A parallel institutional literature quantifies the conditions these legal analyses invoke. The ILO's framing of child trafficking emphasises the removal of children from protective environments and the exploitation of their vulnerability, and its joint estimates with UNICEF document both the global scale of child labour and its recent rise (International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025). UNODC's (2024) global reporting complements this by showing how detected trafficking is patterned by gender, age, and purpose, and by identifying the recruitment and coercion methods—including digital ones—through which vulnerability is converted into exploitation. UNICEF's regional analysis situates Central Asian children within a wider Europe-and-Central-Asia context of poverty, displacement, institutional weakness, and digital risk (UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2026).

This literature is indispensable for scale and comparability, but it shares a structural limitation that is central to this paper: its strongest measures concern trafficking and labour, and it acknowledges that official detection is shaped by monitoring capacity, so that low recorded figures may reflect weak systems rather than low prevalence. It measures effort and detection well; it measures underlying incidence only indirectly.

Anthropological Accounts of Bride Abduction

The anthropological literature on abduction runs on a separate track and supplies precisely what the trafficking literature lacks: an account of abduction that is not reducible to trafficking. Studies of bride kidnapping, or *ala kachuu*, in Kyrgyzstan document a widespread practice in which young women, a meaningful share of them adolescents, are abducted for marriage (Kleinbach et al., 2005; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007). Werner (2009) interprets the post-Soviet resurgence of bride abduction as a reassertion of patriarchal authority legitimised through local discourses of shame and tradition, showing that abduction can be socially organised and normalised rather than simply criminal.

These works agree that the practice is common and gendered, but they differ in emphasis—some foreground custom and consent, others coercion and rights—and they disagree, at least implicitly, on how far the practice should be assimilated to trafficking. Their principal limitation for a regional study is scope: they are grounded in Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan, and they are ethnographic rather than comparative, so they cannot by themselves establish how abduction relates to structural conditions across the region.

Integrating the Literatures: Opportunity, Legitimacy, and Capacity

Underlying these empirical literatures is a theoretical question about why vulnerability translates into victimisation, and here criminological and anthropological accounts can be integrated rather than opposed. The routine activity approach in criminology holds that a criminal act requires the convergence in time and space of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Applied to Central Asia, the framework reframes structural conditions as the machinery

that makes such convergence more likely: labour migration removes guardians from the household, weak child-protection systems remove them from the institutional environment, and poverty raises the perceived suitability of children as targets for labour, marriage, or sexual exploitation.

Anthropological work supplies what routine activity theory leaves under-specified, namely why certain forms of abduction are not merely tolerated but socially legitimated; Werner's (2009) analysis of shame and tradition explains how bride kidnapping can persist as a normalised practice rather than a furtive crime. Combining the two suggests that in this region opportunity and legitimacy operate together, so that abduction is simultaneously a matter of weak guardianship and of normative sanction—a synthesis that neither discipline reaches alone and that this study carries into its interpretation of the evidence.

Two further empirical strands complete the picture and sharpen the methodological contrast running through the field. Research on migration and trafficking vulnerability, including case-study work on Kazakhstan, links large-scale labour migration to heightened exposure to trafficking and exploitation, both for migrating adults and for the children left behind in remittance-dependent households (Khamzin et al., 2023). Work on child and forced marriage, drawing on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and demographic surveys, quantifies how many children marry before eighteen and documents the difficulty of measuring practices conducted through unregistered religious ceremonies.

These strands illustrate how sharply methodology shapes what each literature can claim: institutional detection data capture only cases that states identify and record, ethnographic studies capture meaning and process but not prevalence, survey instruments capture prevalence but only for registered or reported unions, and legal analyses capture policy design but not on-the-ground incidence. No single method sees the whole, and because each is biased in a different direction, only their combination approaches an adequate account. Across all of them, scholars nonetheless converge on a common substantive theme: the conditions that make children vulnerable—poverty, migration, weak protection, and gendered norms—recur across trafficking, forced marriage, and abduction, even though these outcomes are studied in separate literatures with incompatible measures.

Definitional Tension and the Digital Dimension

A recurring point of tension across these literatures concerns definition, and it is worth making explicit because it bears directly on measurement. The trafficking literature works from the internationally standardised Palermo definition, in which an act of recruitment or movement, a means such as coercion or deception, and a purpose of exploitation must coincide; the anthropological literature works from an emic understanding in which abduction is defined by the taking itself and its social aftermath, irrespective of onward movement or commercial purpose. These are not merely terminological differences. A bride kidnapping that ends in a locally recognised marriage may satisfy the anthropological definition of abduction without meeting the trafficking threshold, while the same act, viewed through a children's-rights lens, may constitute forced child marriage and, where exploitation follows, trafficking. Scholars consequently disagree about whether bride kidnapping should be counted as trafficking, as gender-based violence, or as a distinct customary practice, and this disagreement is one reason the phenomenon falls between administrative categories and goes largely uncounted. The present study does

not resolve the debate but treats the categories as analytically separate and empirically overlapping, which is the position most consistent with the evidence.

A final strand concerns the digital dimension, which the older regional literature could not anticipate. Institutional research now identifies the internet as a growing channel for recruitment, grooming, and the coordination of exploitation, and treats connectivity as a double-edged development that expands both opportunity for offenders and, potentially, avenues for detection and support (UNODC, 2024; UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2026). This literature remains thin for Central Asia specifically, and it has not been connected to the region's uneven connectivity, which is one of the openings this study addresses by placing digital indicators alongside the more established economic and institutional ones.

Taken together, the literature establishes three points and leaves one gap. It establishes that institutional capacity shapes both the reality and the recorded picture of exploitation; that abduction in Central Asia includes forms, above all bride kidnapping, that trafficking frameworks do not capture; and that a shared set of structural conditions underlies otherwise distinct outcomes. What it does not do is integrate these insights. No study combines the security, legal, anthropological, and institutional literatures into a single structural account of child abduction and exploitation across all five states, distinguishes the relevant categories consistently, and treats the region's severe data limitations as an analytical problem to be addressed rather than a footnote. This study is designed to fill that gap, and the interdisciplinary combination it proposes—criminological attention to opportunity and guardianship, anthropological attention to norms and household dynamics, and institutional attention to capacity and measurement—is what makes filling it possible.

METHODS

Design

This study uses a qualitative, comparative secondary-data design structured around multiple indicators. It is not a mixed-methods study in the technical sense, because it does not generate primary quantitative data or apply inferential statistics; rather, it assembles existing quantitative and qualitative evidence from documentary sources and analyses it comparatively. Nor does it claim systematic case-study analysis in the methodological sense, because cases were not sampled against pre-specified selection criteria; instead, the five states function as bounded comparative units. Stating these limits precisely is itself a response to the common error of over-labelling student research as mixed-methods or case-study work when it is neither.

The design follows directly from the nature of the problem. Directly comparable, annual statistics on child kidnapping do not exist for all five Central Asian states, because national reporting systems differ in definition, coverage, and transparency, and because much abduction and forced marriage occurs outside official registration. A design that demanded such data would be unable to proceed. The multi-indicator strategy adopted here therefore triangulates several partial but verifiable measures that each illuminate a

different facet of structural vulnerability, on the principle that convergence across independent indicators supports more credible inference than reliance on any single, flawed measure.

Source Selection

Sources were selected according to explicit inclusion criteria. The study prioritised, in order, primary institutional data from international organisations (UNODC, ILO, UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank, and the U.S. Department of State), national statistical instruments such as Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, and peer-reviewed academic research indexed in scholarly databases. Reputable non-governmental and journalistic sources were admitted only where they reported figures traceable to institutional or governmental origins, and were used to document estimates—such as non-governmental counts of bride kidnapping—that official systems do not capture.

Sources were excluded where a figure could not be traced to an identifiable methodology or original source, where a secondary repost obscured the primary document, or where the data fell outside the five-country scope. Where a single number was available from several outlets, the most authoritative original was cited. This procedure cannot eliminate the biases of the underlying sources, but it makes them traceable, which is a precondition for the discrepancy analysis described below.

Selection of States and Period

The five states were selected because they constitute the conventionally defined region of former Soviet Central Asia and because, together, they span the range of conditions the study examines, from the region's wealthiest and most digitally connected economy to its most remittance-dependent and least connected. The period 2015 to 2025 was selected to capture a decade of rapid digital and economic change, including the disruption around the COVID-19 pandemic. Within that period, specific benchmark years are used only where reliable comparable data exist for a given indicator—for example, early-2024 connectivity figures or particular survey years—and these are presented as dated snapshots rather than as points on a continuous annual series. The study does not assert a fully longitudinal annual trend in abduction, because the data to support such an assertion are absent.

Indicators and Their Interpretation

Each structural domain was matched to indicators that are both verifiable and defensible as measures of that domain, and each indicator is interpreted strictly as a measure of a structural condition rather than as a direct measure of abduction. Economic precarity and migration were represented by personal remittances as a share of GDP, a standard World Bank measure that indicates the prevalence of household dependence on absent earners; it does not, by itself, establish parental absence in any individual household, and is read here as a structural signal rather than a headcount of unguarded children. Institutional and child-protection capacity were represented by external assessments of anti-trafficking effort, namely Trafficking in Persons tier placements, read strictly as measures of governmental effort against an external standard rather than as measures of incidence.

Gendered social norms and their most acute consequence for children were represented by child- and forced-marriage prevalence and by documented estimates of bride kidnapping. Digital transformation was

represented by internet-penetration data, which indicates the size of the online environment in which mediated recruitment can occur but does not, by itself, demonstrate exposure to online exploitation. No indicator was asked to measure child kidnapping directly, because none can; each was used to characterise a condition that theory links to abduction and exploitation risk. To keep this discipline explicit, the analysis distinguishes throughout among three epistemic categories: what an indicator directly shows, what is reasonably inferred from it, and what remains unknown.

Analytic Strategy

Analysis proceeded by organising the evidence around the four structural domains identified in the literature—economic precarity and migration, institutional and child-protection capacity, gendered social norms, and digital transformation—and then comparing indicators across states and, where data allowed, across time. Cross-source comparison served two functions: triangulation, in which agreement among independent measures strengthened a claim, and discrepancy analysis, in which disagreement—most importantly between recorded and estimated case counts—was treated as evidence about the measurement system itself.

Reliability was pursued by preferring institutional sources with documented methodologies and by attaching each figure to its source and year; validity was pursued by matching each indicator explicitly to the construct it can and cannot measure, so that, for instance, a trafficking tier ranking is read as an assessment of governmental anti-trafficking effort rather than as a count of abducted children. Two limitations were handled directly rather than set aside. First, differences in national reporting systems mean that a lower recorded figure may indicate weaker monitoring rather than a smaller problem; the analysis therefore interprets official counts alongside independent estimates and treats large gaps between them as substantive findings. Second, underreporting is pervasive, particularly for abduction and forced marriage conducted through unregistered ceremonies; the study accordingly avoids inferring prevalence from official counts alone and flags where figures should be read as lower bounds.

Because the study relies entirely on existing public documents and reports no new human-subjects data, it raises limited ethical concerns, but it observes the ethical obligation not to overstate what fragmentary data about a vulnerable population can support.

RESULTS

The evidence is organised around the four structural domains and the conceptual distinctions set out above. It shows a region that is internally divided across every domain, and it shows that the measurement of abduction is itself one of the clearest findings. Table 1 summarises the four domains across the five states; Table 2 sets out the conceptual distinctions and the principal measurement problem attached to each.

Economic Precarity and Migration

The five states differ markedly in their dependence on labour migration, one of the conditions most consistently linked to household vulnerability in the literature. World Bank figures for 2024 place

personal remittances at approximately 45 percent of GDP in Tajikistan—the highest share of any economy in the world—compared with about 24 percent in Kyrgyzstan and 14 percent in Uzbekistan (World Bank, 2024). What these figures directly show is the scale of household dependence on earnings sent from abroad; what is reasonably inferred is that large numbers of working-age parents are absent and that many children are raised in the care of relatives or institutions, an arrangement the migration-and-trafficking literature associates with heightened exposure (Khamzin et al., 2023); what remains unknown from these data alone is the number of individual children left without adult guardianship at any given time.

This dependence is not incidental to poverty but structurally entwined with it: World Bank analysis indicates that without remittances the poverty rate in Uzbekistan would stand at roughly 16.8 percent rather than 9.6 percent, meaning that the same migration that sustains households also removes the guardians who would otherwise be present within them (World Bank, 2024). Figure 2 displays these shares. Remittance dependence of this magnitude is a defining feature of the Tajik and Kyrgyz economies in particular, and it distinguishes them sharply from Kazakhstan, which is a net destination for regional migrant labour rather than a sender. The concentration of extreme remittance dependence in Tajikistan, alongside its low connectivity, marks it as a distinct structural environment from wealthier Kazakhstan.

Institutional and Child-Protection Capacity

Institutional effort against exploitation, as assessed externally, was broadly similar across the region by the mid-2020s but had moved over the decade. In the 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report, all five states were placed in Tier 2, with Turkmenistan on the Tier 2 Watch List; the report noted that Turkmenistan had risen from Tier 3 and that Tajikistan had advanced from the Tier 2 Watch List to full Tier 2 status (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Read correctly, these placements measure governmental anti-trafficking effort against the standards of the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act rather than the number of children abducted, trafficked, or married; a tier can rise because a government passes legislation, opens investigations, or improves victim identification, none of which is the same as a reduction in harm.

The convergence of all five states on Tier 2 by 2025 therefore indicates a regional floor of formal engagement rather than an equalisation of outcomes, and the movement of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan up the scale is best read as improved compliance in states starting from a low base. The opacity of Turkmenistan is itself a result: with little transparent public data, it is assessed largely on formal measures, and its true incidence of abduction and exploitation is the least knowable of the five.

The capacity to record is also demonstrated by reform effects. In Uzbekistan, the number of registered marriages involving girls under eighteen fell from 4,786 in 2018 to 74 in 2022 following legal change (Eurasianet, 2024). A shift of this size over four years is far too rapid to represent a real collapse in early marriage and more plausibly reflects the displacement of such marriages into unregistered religious ceremonies. What the figure directly shows is a change in registration; what is inferred is a shift in the visibility, not necessarily the incidence, of the practice; what remains unknown is the true number of under-eighteen marriages now conducted informally. This case is among the clearest illustrations in the study of official statistics tracking recording practices as much as underlying reality.

Gendered Social Norms and Abduction

The clearest region-specific evidence of child abduction concerns the abduction of adolescent girls for marriage, a phenomenon distinct from trafficking. In Kyrgyzstan, the practice of *ala kachuu* is documented but severely under-recorded: government sources recorded 895 bride-kidnapping cases across the five years from 2013 to 2018, whereas non-governmental estimates place the number of women and girls abducted for marriage nearer 12,000 annually, and the country's 2020 Voluntary National Review reported that over 20 percent of marriages involved bride kidnapping and 6 percent were forced (Girls Not Brides, n.d.-a). The gap between roughly 895 recorded cases over five years and an estimated 12,000 per year is the single starkest illustration in this study of how far official counts can understate a practice.

Child marriage, which overlaps with abduction where the girl is under eighteen, varies across the region. The share of women married before eighteen is about 9 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 6 percent in Turkmenistan, and 3 percent in Uzbekistan on recent Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey data, around 4 to 5 percent in Kazakhstan, and, on older demographic data for Tajikistan, closer to 15 percent, with roughly 2.5 million child marriages estimated across Central Asia overall (Child Marriage Data Portal, n.d.; Girls Not Brides, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). These country figures must be read with care, since they derive from surveys of different years and capture only registered or reported unions; they are best treated as lower bounds and as broadly indicative of a north–south gradient in which the wealthier, more urban states record lower prevalence.

In Kyrgyzstan, where the evidence is richest, UN sources report that 7,000 to 9,000 girls marry annually and that around 500 girls aged 13 to 17 become mothers each year, while some 13.8 percent of women under twenty-four married through a form of coercion (United Nations, 2022; UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, n.d.). These figures are presented in Table 1 and Figure 3. Read against the anthropological literature, they give a quantitative complement to Werner's (2009) ethnographic claim that bride abduction persists as a socially legitimated practice: the coercion figure indicates that the practice is not only common but normatively sanctioned, which is one reason it survives at scale despite legal prohibition.

Digital Transformation

Connectivity expanded across the decade but remains sharply unequal, producing very different digital-risk environments. As Table 1 and Figure 1 show, internet penetration at the start of 2024 stood at roughly 92 percent of the population in Kazakhstan (about 18.2 million users) and 83 percent in Uzbekistan (about 29.5 million users), but at only about 42 percent in Tajikistan (about 4.3 million users) and 40 percent in Turkmenistan (about 2.6 million users), with Kyrgyzstan intermediate at around 80 percent (Kemp, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e). A spread of more than fifty percentage points between the most and least connected states within a single region is itself striking, and it maps only loosely onto wealth, since Uzbekistan combines relatively modest income with very high connectivity.

Because UNODC (2024) identifies online recruitment and manipulation as growing methods through which children are drawn into exploitation, higher connectivity plausibly widens the surface for digital recruitment in the more connected states, even as the least connected states remain more exposed to older,

in-person forms of coercion. What the connectivity data directly show is the size of the online population; what is inferred is a shift in the likely channel of recruitment; what remains unknown is any direct measure of online exploitation, which no available source provides for these states. Connectivity is therefore not straightforwardly protective or harmful; it reshapes the form that risk takes, shifting it toward mediated contact in the digitally saturated states and leaving it more physically bounded in the others. This is one reason the study resists a single regional narrative: the same decade of digital expansion means different things for a child in Almaty and a child in rural Tajikistan.

Comparative Synthesis Across Domains

Reading the four domains across the five states together, rather than one indicator at a time, brings out both shared features and systematic differences. The clearest similarity is institutional: by 2025 all five states occupied Tier 2, indicating a common floor of formal anti-trafficking engagement, and every domain shows the same recording problem, in which documented figures sit well below independent estimates. A gendered pattern is also common to the region, with girls disproportionately exposed across marriage, abduction, and trafficking outcomes.

The differences, however, are what the comparison makes visible. Connectivity ranges across more than fifty percentage points; remittance dependence ranges from a net-destination economy to the highest share in the world; and recorded child-marriage prevalence follows a north–south gradient. Crucially, these domains do not simply add together into a single regional risk score; they combine in different configurations. Tajikistan pairs extreme remittance dependence with low connectivity, so its structural profile is dominated by migration-driven guardianship gaps and by exposure to in-person coercion. Kyrgyzstan combines high connectivity with a strongly documented abduction-for-marriage tradition, placing it at the intersection of digital and customary risk. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan pair higher wealth or connectivity with lower recorded early marriage, shifting the plausible locus of risk toward digitally mediated recruitment of the kind UNODC (2024) describes. Turkmenistan, the least connected and most opaque, is the state whose true situation is least knowable. Vulnerability is therefore configurational rather than uniform, which is why a regional average would mislead and why any response must be tailored to the specific configuration each state presents.

Summary of Findings

Three findings emerge. First, structural risk is unevenly distributed: no single regional profile fits all five states, which differ systematically in connectivity, migration dependence, and recorded institutional effort. Second, the dominant obstacle to studying child abduction directly is measurement, not the absence of the phenomenon; the recorded–estimated gap in Kyrgyz bride kidnapping and the reform-driven collapse in Uzbek registered child marriages both show official figures responding to recording practices rather than to underlying reality. Third, the indicators converge on a common structural core—poverty and migration, weak protection, gendered norms, and digital change—while remaining conceptually distinct, which is precisely why no one of them should be read as a direct measure of child kidnapping.

DISCUSSION

The results support the paper's central argument and, read against the literature, both confirm and extend prior scholarship. The finding that structural conditions rather than isolated offending best explain the distribution of risk aligns with the institutional literature's emphasis on capacity and vulnerability (International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025; UNODC, 2024) and with the legal scholarship that locates causation in socio-economic and institutional weakness (Batyrbekova et al., 2025; Dyussenova et al., 2024). It confirms Jackson's (2006) insight that state responses are shaped by how the problem is framed, while shifting the analytical lens from the state to the child and the household. Where the present study departs from the security and legal literatures is in refusing to treat trafficking as the master category: the bride-kidnapping evidence shows a form of child abduction that those frameworks cannot see, and that becomes visible only when anthropological work (Kleinbach et al., 2005; Werner, 2009) is placed alongside institutional data.

What the Interdisciplinary Integration Reveals

The interdisciplinary combination is not decorative; it does specific analytical work that no single literature can do alone, and it is worth stating precisely what each discipline contributes and what only their combination yields. Criminology contributes the expectation that abduction concentrates where motivated offenders meet vulnerable targets under weak guardianship, which frames migration-driven parental absence and thin child-protection systems as opportunity structures rather than mere background. Anthropology explains why some abduction is socially organised and normalised; Werner's (2009) account of shame and tradition clarifies why *ala kachuu* persists at a scale of thousands while generating fewer than a thousand recorded cases over five years. Sociology and child-protection research supply the household and institutional mechanisms—remittance dependence, unregistered marriage, weak monitoring—through which norms and opportunity translate into concrete risk.

The specific insight that emerges from the combination, and from no single discipline, concerns the interpretation of the measurement gap. Institutional detection data alone cannot distinguish a genuinely low prevalence from a high prevalence that is poorly recorded: a figure of 895 recorded cases is, on its own, ambiguous. Anthropological evidence that *ala kachuu* is common, socially legitimated, and typically conducted outside formal registration supplies the missing premise that allows the low recorded count to be read, against the non-governmental estimate of roughly 12,000 per year, as evidence of systematic under-recording rather than of a small problem. Neither criminology, which theorises opportunity, nor anthropology, which theorises legitimacy, nor institutional data, which measure capacity, can by itself both explain why the practice persists and establish that official statistics undercount it. Only their integration does. A single-discipline account would miss at least one of these: a purely criminological reading would under-theorise the normative legitimacy of bride kidnapping, a purely anthropological reading would under-specify its structural correlates across states, and a purely institutional reading would misread low official counts as low prevalence. The contribution of the study is to show that these readings are complementary and that child abduction in Central Asia can only be adequately explained when they are combined.

A Configurational Theory of Structural Vulnerability

The cross-state variation refines how structural vulnerability should be theorised. The central theoretical claim of the paper is that the four domains operate through identifiable mechanisms rather than as a diffuse background, and that they combine configurationally rather than additively. Each domain can be stated as a mechanism linking a structural condition to heightened vulnerability: labour migration is associated with reduced parental guardianship and thus with the guardianship gaps that opportunity theory identifies; weak child-protection capacity is associated with both thin institutional guardianship and systematic under-detection, so that it degrades protection and measurement at once; gendered norms confer normative legitimacy on abduction for marriage, so that the practice persists and is under-reported; and digital transformation opens a new surface of mediated contact, shifting the form of risk toward online recruitment where connectivity is high. Each link is a plausible, theoretically grounded association rather than a demonstrated causal effect, because the available data establish co-occurrence and mechanism, not measured impact on an abduction rate.

Because these mechanisms combine in different configurations, the results suggest that the four domains do not sum into a single regional risk score. Tajikistan pairs extreme remittance dependence with low connectivity, so its risk profile is dominated by migration-driven guardianship gaps and in-person coercion; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pair higher wealth or connectivity with lower recorded early marriage, shifting the plausible locus of risk toward digitally mediated recruitment; and Kyrgyzstan combines high connectivity with a strongly documented abduction-for-marriage tradition. Vulnerability is therefore configurational rather than uniform, which is why a regional average would mislead and why intervention cannot be identical across states. This configurational reading is a modest theoretical extension of the institutional literature, which tends to characterise the region as a whole, and it follows directly from holding several indicators side by side rather than relying on one.

Extending the Literature on Measurement

The findings also speak back to the anthropological literature. Werner's (2009) argument that bride abduction expresses a post-Soviet reassertion of patriarchal norms is consistent with the persistence of *al kachuu* at scale despite legal prohibition, and the coercion figure—13.8 percent of women under twenty-four married through some form of compulsion—gives a quantitative complement to that ethnographic claim (UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, n.d.). At the same time, the evidence cautions against generalising the Kyrgyz case, since comparable documentation does not exist for the other states; what can be said is that where such practices are documented, they are substantial, gendered, and largely invisible to official statistics.

The clearest extension of prior work is on measurement. Existing studies acknowledge underreporting; this study makes the measurement gap a finding. The contrast between roughly 895 recorded Kyrgyz bride-kidnapping cases over five years and an estimated 12,000 abductions per year, and the fall in Uzbek registered under-eighteen marriages from 4,786 to 74 in four years, together demonstrate that official statistics in this domain track recording practices as much as reality (Eurasianet, 2024; Girls Not Brides, n.d.-a). This has a direct methodological implication that the prior literature has not drawn out sharply: in

this region, trend claims built on official counts are unreliable, and improvements in tier rankings or declines in registered cases may signal changing administrative behaviour rather than falling harm. The study's multi-indicator design is thus not only a workaround for missing data but an argument about how vulnerability should be assessed where direct measurement is compromised.

Implications

Several practical implications follow, each tied to the evidence rather than asserted in general terms. Because remittance dependence and parental absence are concentrated in specific states, child-protection resources for children in migrant-sending households are most needed where dependence is highest, notably Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Because connectivity reshapes rather than simply increases risk, digital-safety measures are most relevant in the highly connected states, while in-person protective monitoring remains central in the least connected. And because bride kidnapping is sustained by normative legitimacy, legal reform alone—as the Uzbek registration data suggest—can displace rather than end the practice, so that enforcement paired with community-level norm change is more likely to be effective.

Regional cooperation is warranted precisely because migration corridors and trafficking routes cross borders, but it should be understood as complementing, not substituting for, domestic protection systems. The global context reinforces the urgency of these measures: with 138 million children still in child labour worldwide and detected trafficking of children rising, Central Asia's structural conditions sit within a wider deterioration rather than an improving trend, and the region's data gaps mean its own contribution to that total is almost certainly undercounted (International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025; UNODC, 2024). A structural account thus carries a warning against complacency: the recent upward movement of several states in external assessments should not be mistaken for evidence that fewer children are being harmed, because the same analysis shows how loosely those assessments track underlying reality.

Limitations

The study's limitations qualify these claims. It relies wholly on secondary sources and generates no primary data, so it cannot establish individual-level causation or verify institutional figures independently. Its indicators are partial and were not designed to measure abduction, and their comparability across states is constrained by differing methodologies and years. The bride-kidnapping evidence is concentrated in Kyrgyzstan and cannot be generalised to states where the practice is less documented, and the near-absence of transparent data from Turkmenistan means that country is characterised more thinly than the others. These limitations bound the conclusions but do not undermine the central argument, which concerns the structural patterning of risk rather than precise prevalence. Future research could address them through country-specific fieldwork, interviews with child-protection practitioners, and the construction of a harmonised regional indicator set that records abduction and forced marriage on consistent definitions.

CONCLUSION

This paper asked how structural conditions shaped children’s vulnerability to abduction and exploitation across the five states of Central Asia between 2015 and 2025, and what an interdisciplinary, multi-indicator approach reveals that incident-based framings miss. The answer is that child abduction in the region is best understood not as a scatter of isolated crimes but as an outcome associated with overlapping structural conditions—economic precarity and labour migration, weak child-protection and institutional capacity, gendered social norms, and rapid and uneven digital transformation—whose configuration differs systematically from one state to the next.

The strongest findings are three. The region is internally divided rather than uniform, spanning near-universal connectivity and extreme remittance dependence within the same decade. The measurement of abduction is itself a central finding: the gap between roughly 895 recorded Kyrgyz bride-kidnapping cases over five years and an estimated 12,000 abductions annually, and the collapse of registered Uzbek under-eighteen marriages after legal reform, show that official counts track recording practices as much as underlying harm. And the several structural indicators, while conceptually distinct from one another and from abduction itself, converge on a common core of vulnerability that no single indicator captures alone.

The study’s contribution is to integrate security, legal, anthropological, and institutional literatures that have developed separately, to hold the categories of kidnapping, abduction, trafficking, and exploitation consistently apart, and to treat the region’s data deficits as an object of analysis rather than a limitation to be apologised for. In doing so it shows that the configuration of risk differs across the five states, so that no single regional prescription will fit all of them, and that the interdisciplinary lens is not a rhetorical flourish but the only way to bring bride kidnapping, trafficking, and labour exploitation into one frame.

The most consequential implication is for measurement: a phenomenon that official systems record only partially cannot be governed well, and building the capacity to count is inseparable from building the capacity to protect. Future work should build the harmonised, disaggregated data infrastructure that a structural account requires, and pair it with country-level fieldwork, so that the conditions identified here can be measured directly rather than inferred. Understanding child abduction in Central Asia as a structural phenomenon is the necessary first step toward protecting the children whom current systems do not even reliably count.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Structural vulnerability indicators across the five Central Asian states.

Country	Internet penetration, start 2024 (%)	Remittances, 2024 (% of GDP)	Women married before 18 (%)	TIP tier placement, 2025
Kazakhstan	92.3	Net destination (low)	≈4.5	Tier 2
Kyrgyzstan	79.8	24	9	Tier 2
Uzbekistan	83.3	14	3	Tier 2
Tajikistan	41.6	45 (world's highest)	≈15	Tier 2 (up from Watch List)
Turkmenistan	39.5	Limited data	6	Tier 2 Watch List (up from Tier 3)

Note. Internet penetration from Kemp (2024a–2024e); remittances from World Bank (2024); child-marriage prevalence from Girls Not Brides (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), Child Marriage Data Portal (n.d.), and United Nations Population Fund (n.d.); tier placements from U.S. Department of State (2025). Child-marriage figures derive from surveys of different years, should be read as lower bounds, and are not strictly comparable across countries.

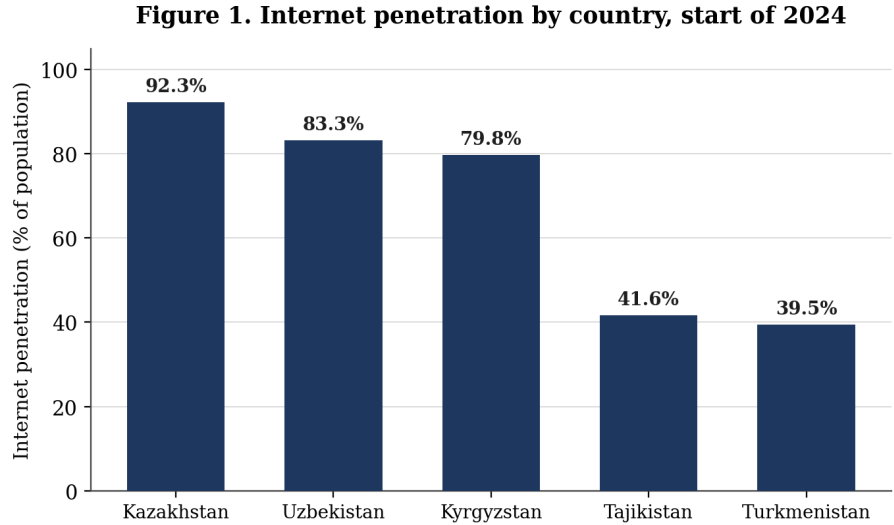
Table 2. Conceptual distinctions among kidnapping, abduction, trafficking, and exploitation, and the principal measurement problem for each.

Concept	Core definition	Illustrative indicator used	Principal measurement problem
Child kidnapping	Unlawful taking or holding of a child	No direct indicator; not measured by any single statistic used here	Not directly measurable; no source counts child kidnappings as such across the five states
Child abduction	Unlawful taking or holding of a child, including abduction for marriage (ala kachuu)	Bride-kidnapping estimates (~12,000/yr est. vs. 895 recorded 2013–2018, Kyrgyzstan)	Severe under-recording; official counts track registration, not incidence

Child trafficking	Act plus means plus purpose of exploitation (Palermo definition)	TIP tier placements; UNODC detection data	Detection depends on state monitoring capacity; low counts may reflect weak systems
Child exploitation	The end purpose of exploitation—sexual, marital, or labour	Child-labour figures (138M globally); child-marriage prevalence	Prevalence captured only for registered or reported cases; underestimates informal arrangements

Note. Compiled by the author from sources cited throughout. The four concepts overlap in practice but are analytically distinct; no single indicator measures child kidnapping directly.

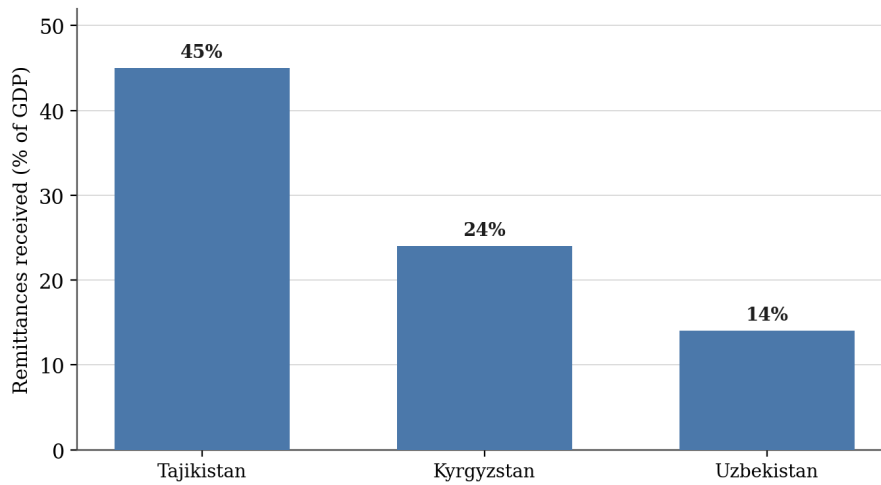
Figure 1. Internet penetration by country, start of 2024.



Note. Percentage of the total population using the internet in January 2024. Data from Kemp (2024a–2024e), DataReportal Digital 2024 reports.

Figure 2. Personal remittances as a share of GDP, 2024.

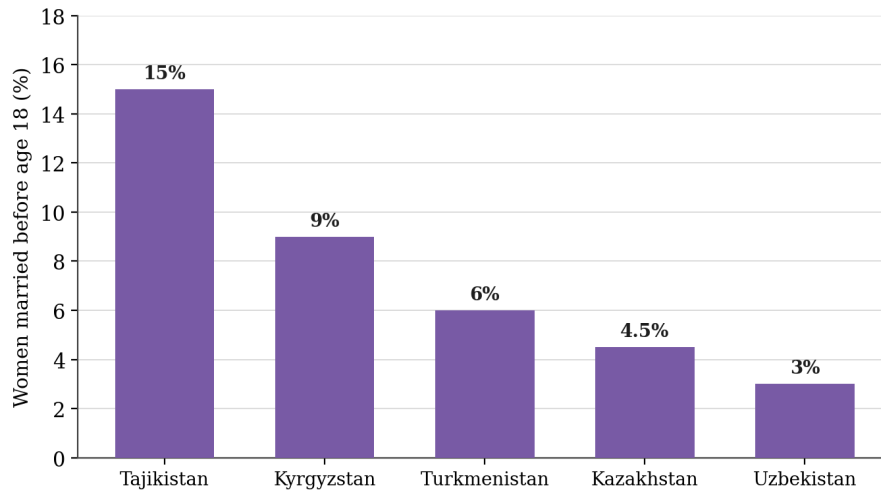
Figure 2. Personal remittances as a share of GDP, 2024



Note. Data from World Bank (2024). Kazakhstan (a net destination for migrant labour) and Turkmenistan are not shown; comparable high-share figures are available for the three principal sending states.

Figure 3. Share of women married before age 18, by country.

Figure 3. Share of women married before age 18, by country



Note. Sources: Girls Not Brides (n.d.-a, n.d.-b); Child Marriage Data Portal (n.d.); United Nations Population Fund (n.d.). Figures capture reported or registered unions only, derive from surveys of different years, and are not strictly comparable across countries.