

Early and/or forced marriages

The issue of early and forced marriages in the Northern Caucasus persists as a deeply entrenched practice. While such practices are not uniformly pervasive across all North Caucasian communities, regions witnessing higher incidence rates are often characterized by a tolerance for early marriage and other traditional customs. These regions particularly include Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. Despite societal shifts and modernizations occurring globally, the North Caucasus region exhibits a distinctive patriarchal trajectory when it comes to family structures. With only a limited number of young people challenging traditional norms, the majority tend to preserve conventional gender roles and religious conservatism. Early and forced marriages in the Northern Caucasus are often justified by tradition, religion, or culture, yet they ultimately represent severe violations of human rights, perpetuating gender discrimination and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Furthermore, they have significant consequences on the lives of girls and young women. Forced into early marriages, they often face adverse health outcomes due to early pregnancies, including increased risks of maternal mortality, obstetric fistulas, and infant mortality. These marriages disrupt education opportunities, limiting the future prospects and economic independence of these young women. Moreover, the psychological impact of being coerced into marriage at a young age can lead to long-term trauma and mental health issues.

The nature of many early marriages complicates efforts to address the issue effectively, as they often go unregistered. Early and/or forced marriages often occur in the context of bride kidnapping, which then results in religious marriage. In the eyes of the local community, religious unions hold equal weight to legal ones, which, in turn, often bypasses the need for official state registration, perpetuating the cycle of underage unions. Due to this, they remain largely overlooked by both authorities and society at large. Though official statistics fail to capture the full extent of the issue due to underreporting and the prevalence of unregistered unions, the increasing figures of early motherhood in the Caucasus hint at a rise in early marriages. In addition, the absence of laws in Russia criminalizing early and/or forced marriages exacerbates the problem, contributing to underreporting and hindering effective intervention efforts. Local efforts to curb practices like bride kidnapping have yielded limited success. While measures such as fines for perpetrators were introduced in Chechnya and Ingushetia, enforcement remains challenging, with some individuals evading punishment due to familial connections or corrupt practices. This lack of effective oversight perpetuates the cycle of early and forced marriages, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive intervention and advocacy.