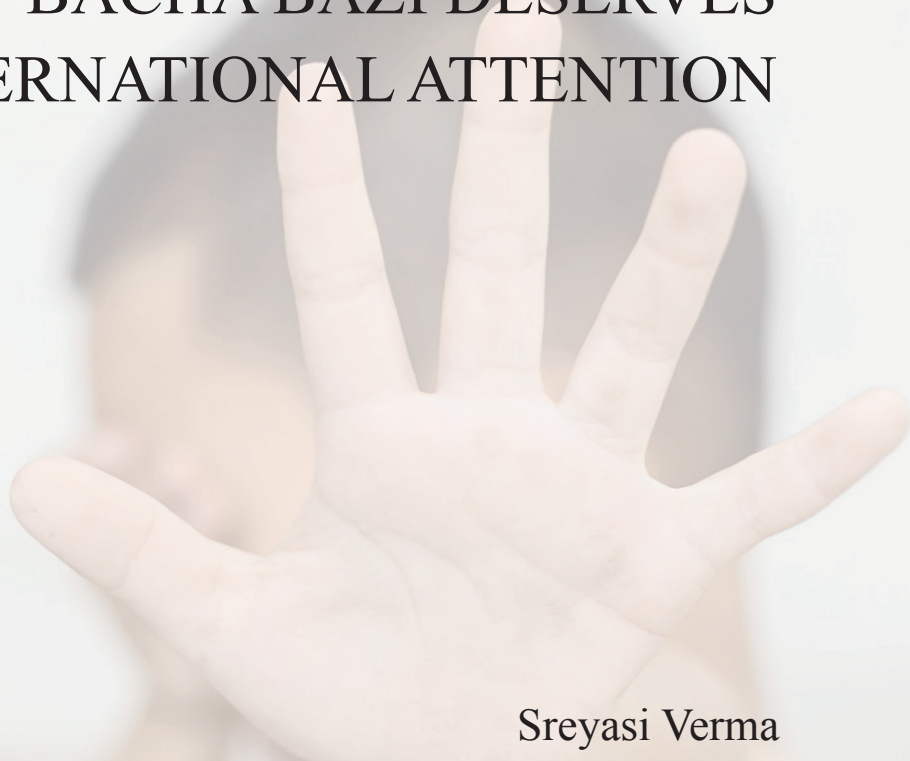


# WHY THE ISSUE OF BACHA BAZI DESERVES INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION



Sreyasi Verma





## WHY THE ISSUE OF BACHA BAZI DESERVES INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

SREYASI VERMA

HIDAYATULLAH NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY

---

### *Abstract*

Of late, the sexual exploitation of minors has become a raging issue for several nations across the world. Among these nations, the South Asian country of Afghanistan sees a disturbingly high incidence of sexual exploitation cases, among which the practice called *Bacha Bazi* has drawn widespread attention and criticism from all quarters. In this practice, young boys are made to dress up in feminine clothes and make-up, in a sexualized manner, and, subsequently, in a lot of cases, forced into flesh trade. The prostitution and slavery of these young boys has become rampant. This paper examines the reasons for sexual exploitation of minors in general, and the resurgence of the practice of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan in particular. It details the Taliban's role in abolishing *Bacha Bazi*, as well as lawlessness in the post-Taliban rule, which became a major reason for the blooming of this condemnable practice. The study also discusses the role of the taboo of homosexuality in conservative Afghanistan in the flourishing of *Bacha Bazi*. Finally, it analyzes the lack of willingness of the international community to fight against *Bacha Bazi*, and offers some suggestions for the elimination of the practice. However, as important human rights scholars have noted, such a practice is very difficult to abolish, even when it threatens to challenge the very basic foundation of human rights and civilization in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** *Bacha Bazi*, sexual exploitation, Taliban, war, homosexuality.

**About the author:** Hidayatullah National Law University, Raipur (C.G), India.

**Received:** November 15, 2018; **reviewed:** December 10, 2018; **accepted:** March 12, 2019

# POR QUÉ EL PROBLEMA DE BACHA BAZI MERECE ATENCIÓN INTERNACIONAL

SREYASI VERMA  
HIDAYATULLAH NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY

---

## *Resumen*

Recientemente, la explotación sexual de menores se ha convertido en un tema caliente para varias naciones en todo el mundo. Entre estas, Afganistán, país en el sur asiático, ve un número alarmantemente alto de casos de explotación sexual, entre los cuales la práctica llamada *Bacha Bazi* ha atraído la atención y las críticas generalizadas de todos los sectores. En esta práctica, niños y adolescentes son obligados a vestirse con ropa y maquillaje femeninos, de manera sexualizada, y, posteriormente, en muchos casos, son forzados al comercio de la carne humana. La prostitución y esclavitud de estos jóvenes se ha vuelto rampante. Este artículo examina los motivos de la explotación sexual de menores en general y el resurgimiento de la práctica de *Bacha Bazi* en Afganistán en particular. Analiza el papel de los talibanes en la abolición de *Bacha Bazi*, así como la situación anárquica posterior a los talibanes, la cual se convirtió en una de las principales razones para el florecimiento de esta práctica reprochable. El estudio también analiza qué papel desempeña el tabú de la homosexualidad en el Afganistán conservador en el florecimiento de *Bacha Bazi*. Finalmente, discute la falta de voluntad de la comunidad internacional para luchar contra la práctica de *Bacha Bazi*, y ofrece algunas sugerencias para la eliminación de la práctica. Sin embargo, como han señalado importantes estudios de derechos humanos, esta práctica es muy difícil de abolir, incluso cuando amenaza con desafiar los fundamentos básicos de los derechos humanos y la civilización en el siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** *Bacha Bazi*, explotación sexual, talibanes, guerra, homosexualidad.

**El autor:** Hidayatullah National Law University, Raipur (C.G), India.

**Recibido:** 15 de noviembre de 2018; **evaluado:** 10 de diciembre de 2018; **aceptado:** 12 de marzo de 2019

## Introduction

“Abuse is never deserved; it is an exploitation of innocence and physical disadvantage, which is perceived as an opportunity by the abuser.”<sup>1</sup>

--Lorraine Nilon

Sexual exploitation of minors is a heinous crime committed by older persons and adolescents indulging in sexual activities with minors, usually for monetary gain and perverse sexual gratification. This includes but is not restricted to the possession and distribution of child pornography. This exploitation has been made easier with the use of technology, which has enabled criminals to be more covert in their activities. The uncontrolled expansion of the Internet has also provided criminals with a huge and easily accessible market for selling and purchasing child pornography, via the dark web and other related means. Technology also makes it easier for predators to prey on young, vulnerable children, and exploit them sexually. A highly prevalent instance of the misuse of technology is when criminals connect with unsuspecting children over the internet, and ask them to send their pictures, or set up a meeting with them in isolated places. The lack of knowledge and realization by children, that they are being exploited, makes them ideal and easy targets for criminals. The physical, mental, and psychological scarring these children undergo during sexual exploitation is immense and, in several cases, largely irreversible.

One such form of sexual exploitation of minors is known as *Bacha Bazi*. Mainly prevalent in Afghanistan, *Bacha Bazi* is the harsh reality that many Afghans have to confront on a daily basis. *Bacha Bazi* is the act where boys as young as ten are dressed up in feminine clothes and make-up, and are forced to entertain older men. Such entertainment is a means of sexual exploitation of the young boys, who are often raped and sexually assaulted after the dance or entertainment is over.

These young boys are often good looking, and they come from poor families, from where they are sold, bought, kidnapped, or traded. The parties where *Bacha Bazi* thrives are called as ‘weddings.’ However, in these ‘weddings,’ the bride and the groom are missing. There are no women in sight either. Men hover there, with their guns. Almost everyone’s attention is focused on young dancing boys who are made

---

<sup>1</sup> Goodreads.com (n.d.). A quote from *Breaking Free From the Chains of Silence* [online]. Available from: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8884772-abuse-is-never-deserved-it-is-an-exploitation-of-innocence> [accessed 1 Feb. 2019].

to wear feminine clothes. Often they are forced to wear bells in their ankles and, in several cases, artificial breasts.<sup>2</sup> They are made to perform in front of lecherous men. However, this is merely the tip of the iceberg. After these parties conclude, the boys are taken to hotels where they are sexually exploited by these older men. This practice, thus, is one of the dark themes in the cultural history of Afghanistan.

The men behind *Bacha Bazi* are very rich and command power in a conservative country such as Afghanistan. The richer and more powerful these men are, the more boy slaves they keep.<sup>3</sup> Boys as young as ten are paraded as trophies or status symbols.

## Cultural Acceptance and Sanction

A common maxim that can be heard on the streets of Afghanistan is that women are for child bearing while boys are for pleasure. *Bacha Bazi*, which was banned under the Taliban's 1996-2001 rule,<sup>4</sup> has started to re-emerge as of late. It is prevalent across southern and eastern Afghanistan's rural Pashtun heartland, and among ethnic Tajiks across the northern countryside.<sup>5</sup> According to several activists, this conservative country has a *Bacha Bazi* problem due to its strict segregation of men and women. The hypothesis is that men are unable to reach women, and hence they make young boys their prey.

However, it is not just conservativeness to be blamed. Many may argue that in a strict Islamic country, such a homosexual act, performed by force and coercion, would be strictly banned. But many Afghans say that *Bacha Bazi* is not homosexuality and should not be regarded as such. According to the study "Pashtun Sexuality" by Human Terrain Team Study, it is not homosexuality that propels men towards *Bacha Bazi*. The study says that *Bacha Bazi* is not *un-Islamic* and is ethical in nature till the man is not in love with the boy. However, civilized countries consider such statements significantly misleading.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rustam Qobil, "The sexually abused dancing boys of Afghanistan." *BBC News* [online] (8 September 2010). Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11217772> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Will Everett, "Confessions of an Afghan Boy Sex Slave." *Newsweek* [online] (30 May 2015). Available from: <https://www.newsweek.com/confessions-afghan-boy-sex-slave-337381> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC), "The dancing boys of Afghanistan" [online]. (19 March 2018). Available from: <https://www.unric.org/en/latest-un-buzz/29091-the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan> [accessed 18 Oct. 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Chris Mondloch, "Bacha Bazi: An Afghan Tragedy." *Foreign Policy* [online] (28 October 2013). Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/28/bacha-bazi-an-afghan-tragedy/> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].

Poverty remains one of the biggest reasons for the flourishing of *Bacha Bazi*. The practice is often consensual since many kids from poor families are either given away by their parents or voluntarily follow their sexual oppressors in exchange for money. For many kids, for whom affording two square meals remains a distant dream, the ramifications of sexual exploitation are ignored. The other big reason is corruption and the indifference of authorities. Such sensitive cases, where the authorities have a moral and professional duty to act with sensitivity, are plagued with inaction. The authorities are regularly bribed so that they turn a blind eye to the sexual exploitation of minor boys.

## Military Depravity

A major reason for the resurgence of *Bacha Bazi* is the prevalence of violence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a heavy army personnel presence, mostly male. Such army personnel exploit boys for their entertainment and sexual gratification.<sup>6</sup> The lopsided power dynamics in Afghanistan makes it possible for the Afghan armed forces to have their way and no voices condemn their actions. United States armed personnel, who have reported seeing such depravity, are concerned and have raised voices to the international community, but their voices are silenced by the United States military.<sup>7</sup> This is because the US believes that *Bacha Bazi* is a cultural problem that the Afghan government has to deal with on its own, and that the US must not interfere.

The 1997 Leahy Law provides that the United States' Department of State and Department of Defense is required to cut off military aid to Foreign States that are party to gross human right violations.<sup>8</sup> However, this law is overlooked and ignored in the case of Afghanistan where soldiers are asked to close their eyes to human rights abuses like *Bacha Bazi*. Although the United States has received many complaints regarding *Bacha Bazi*, some made by their own soldiers, they are yet to act against funding Afghanistan. A report has stated that organizations and individuals, who have knowledge of sexual exploitation cases, often lack explicit details or show

---

<sup>6</sup> Sajed Halal Shajjan, "The revised Afghanistan criminal code: an end for *Bacha Bazi*?" (LSE Blog, n.d.). Available from: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/01/24/the-revised-afghanistan-criminal-code-an-end-for-bacha-bazi/> [accessed 1 Feb. 2019].

<sup>7</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). *Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces*. [ebook]. (2018). Available from: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/inspections/SIGAR%2017-47-IP.pdf> [accessed 1 Feb. 2019].

<sup>8</sup> Legal Information Institute. "22 U.S. Code § 2378d. Limitation on assistance to security forces." [online] (n.d.). Available from: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2378d>

reluctance in sharing such information with the United States Government. In addition, two out of three army men who reported sexual exploitation stated that they did not have training to adequately respond to such ongoing exploitation by the Afghan armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

*Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan is at its peak since the Afghan Military and warlords see in this practice a way to flex their power and insist upon boy child slaves. These military servicemen enjoy a social standing that only a few do, and hence international and national criticism is restricted.

## ***Bacha Bazi* and the Taliban**

The Taliban has traditionally nursed an aversion to *Bacha Bazi*. During their rule between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban took many steps to abolish all things they considered *un-Islamic*, including drugs, kite flying, women education, and employment in a mixed sex workplace. Eventually, *Bacha Bazi* was also outlawed due to its roots in homosexuality. The Taliban strictly enforced their ban on *Bacha Bazi*. Sharia law was enforced very strictly and punishments were barbaric. One of the few good outcomes of this was the elimination of *Bacha Bazi*, efficiently and thoroughly, across Afghanistan. There is a rumor that one of the reasons for the founding of the Taliban by Mullah Omar was the prevalence of *Bacha Bazi* all around Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The practice which closely resembled homosexuality was deemed to be both immoral and illegal under strict Sharia laws. However, according to *Los Angeles Times*, “many have accused the Taliban to be hypocritical in their approach because they were alleged to be keeping *halekon* (male lover) secretly in religious schools or madrassas.”<sup>11</sup>

Things started to change after the terrorist attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001. The Taliban, which had established itself after the fall of Kabul, was driven out after a United States led invasion on account of harboring terrorism and providing a safe haven to Osama bin Laden. When the iron grip on the country loosened, laws enforced by the Taliban began to be flouted once again. *Bacha Bazi*

---

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR, *Child Sexual Assault*. Available from: <https://sigar.mil/pdf/inspections/SIGAR%2017-47-IP.pdf> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].

<sup>10</sup> “Kandahar comes out of the closet.” *Free Republic* [online] (11 January 2002). Available from: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/606581/posts> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Human Terrain Team. “Pashtun Sexuality” [e-book]. (n.d.). Available from: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/HTT-PashtunSexuality.pdf> [accessed 21 Oct. 2018].



began flourishing again. The practice which had once carried the punishment of death and mutilation redeemed itself.

As time passed, warlords, soldiers, powerful men, wealthy men, all began to flex their muscles. Fights ensued on who would take which boy home. Most of these activities were consensual since the boy's family got prestige and money, and the boy was well fed by his captors. Eventually, this practice, which brought with itself social status, ended up exposing many men's malicious desires to own and sodomize little boys. This has made the Taliban re-think its stance.

This time, the Taliban does not want to ban *Bacha Bazi*. Now the Taliban is focused on using boy spies as bait to honey-trap powerful Afghans. In Uruzgan, an area in Afghanistan where *Bacha Bazi* by policemen thrives like no other, the Taliban has been found to send boy slaves to entice them, and later kill them.<sup>12</sup> Common people cannot act against this practice because the people involved are wealthy and powerful. The government cannot act against it because the policemen involved often refuse to work without their boy slaves. However, after severe international condemnation, President Ashraf Ghani has promised to start a thorough investigation into this ongoing practice that helps the Taliban use this depravity to launch insider attacks.<sup>13</sup> Till then, it is a never ending fight among multiple stakeholders—the Taliban; a considerably weak government that has failed time and again to stop this practice; military and police officers in power who refuse to fight in a war-ravaged country till their thirst for young boy slaves is quenched; and, caught among it all, the boy slaves or *bacha bereesh*.

## Women in Afghanistan

Few things in the world are as overlooked as women's rights in Afghanistan. While the Taliban relegated women to the lowest of the low, the status of women even before their repressive rule was not any good. The constant forcing of women to stay at home, to cover up, the enforcing of strict gender segregation, not allowing women to go outside without a male chaperone, and ruthless and disproportionate

---

<sup>12</sup> Anuj Chopra, "Taliban use 'honey trap' boys to kill Afghan police." *Yahoo News* [online] (16 June 2016). Available from: <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/taliban-honey-trap-boys-kill-afghan-police-034032058.html> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].

<sup>13</sup> Agence France-Presse, (2016). "Kabul to investigate child sex slavery fuelling insider attacks." *The Telegraph* [online]. (28 June 2016). Available from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/28/kabul-to-investigate-child-sex-slavery-fuelling-insider-attacks/> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].

punishment when women defied this, resulted in a country that started to make do without its women. Women were relevant only for child-bearing and raising.<sup>14</sup>

The widespread culture of *Bacha Bazi* owes its roots to the dismal condition of women in this South Asian country. Since women must be so reclusive in this conservative country, boys are forced to apply make-up and are paraded in women's clothes so they can satisfy the lecherous desire of older men. This practice causes psychological trauma and cognitive dissonance as it challenges the internal "male" gender identity young boys identify with. It also reinforces the often reiterated idea that women are only meant to bear children and boys are meant for pleasure. If the mixing of men and women was not so frowned upon, the illegal activities under the garb of *Bacha Bazi* would probably not be so prevalent.

After the ouster of the Taliban, some hard-fought gains have been won in this regard. A slow and unsteady progress towards women's rights has been started, although it has been marred by violence and the cultural belief that women seeking public office are immoral.<sup>15</sup> Now that the international community has also loosened its noose around Afghanistan's neck, detractors of women's rights are trying to roll back the gains made after the Taliban's exit.<sup>16</sup> This has also created the conditions for *Bacha Bazi* to thrive and survive. Till Afghanistan does not empower its women, this condemnable practice will continue. The country regards *Bacha Bazi* as more moral than defiling a woman.<sup>17</sup> Ensuring women's rights would open a debate on sex, consent, and pedophilia, and would challenge the cultural acceptability of the practice of *Bacha Bazi*.

## ***Bacha Bazi* and Homosexuality**

Homosexuality is a punishable offence in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The punishment is extremely harsh. So why does Afghanistan excuse men violating

---

<sup>14</sup> Harjot Kaur and Najla Ayubi, "Status of Women in Afghanistan." *The Asia Foundation* [online]. (21 January 2009). Available from: <https://asiafoundation.org/2009/01/21/status-of-women-in-afghanistan/> [accessed 1 Feb. 2019].

<sup>15</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2014 - Tier 2: Afghanistan." (30 April 2014). Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5369e5b310.html> [accessed 22 October 2018].

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2014: Afghanistan." *Human Rights Watch* [online] (n.d.). Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/afghanistan>

<sup>17</sup> "Taliban use 'honey trap' boys to kill Afghan police." *Dawn* [online]. (16 June 2016). Available from: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1265215> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].

little boys? Surely there would be far louder outrage if two different sexes were involved, or if two grown men or two women were consensually indulging in sex.

The answer lies in the culture of Afghanistan. The culture sees men exploiting young boys as a sign of power, wealth, and status, but not as homosexuality. Since these men are deemed not to be in love with the boys, it is not homosexuality in the eyes of society. If the men were in love, it would be another story. It is very much possible though that some men do possess homosexual urges and use young boys to satisfy them. The punishment meted out to gays in Afghanistan is excessive. Thus, for the more powerful among them, it is easier to hide under the garb of culturally accepted *Bacha Bazi* and practice pedophilia than to have a consensual relationship in this conservative nation.

The international community must condemn this culturally sanctioned rape, and help Afghanistan enact and implement laws to protect their children, and also the homosexual community. This will not only help the homosexual community in the country, but also highlight *Bacha Bazi* cases and a distinction between power, sex, and rape. If consensual sex between two adults is legalized, then nonconsensual sex, including pedophilia, will suffer a natural setback. It will also awaken the nation's collective conscience against the exploitation of young boys. Consensual relationships will constitute another step in the right direction to achieve human rights, and sex with minors of either gender should be considered a grave crime. But in a country where homosexuals are constantly under the threat of death penalty or murder, this still seems a long way off.

## Afghan Laws

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has stated that while Afghanistan's criminal law prohibits rape and homosexuality, no clear provisions on *Bacha Bazi* have been drafted.<sup>18</sup> Article 427 of the Afghanistan Penal Code provides punishments for both adultery and pederasty. In case the victim is less than eighteen years old, it is to be considered an aggravating condition. It is also an aggravating condition when the person committing the act is in a position of authority over the victim.<sup>19</sup> Pederasty may be understood to include sodomy in

---

<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), "Causes and Consequences of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan." (18 August 2014). Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5694c3db4.html> [accessed 18 October 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Article 427 of the Afghanistan Penal Code.

its ambit. While Article 427 may cover a few aspects of *Bacha Bazi*, it is certainly not a punishment for *Bacha Bazi*. The non-exhaustive nature of this article has led to the open flouting of laws. Other acts of exploitation and the treatment of the “dancing boys of Afghanistan” remains unpunished.

Nevertheless, a recent attempt has been made to revolutionize the Afghan criminal code. A comprehensive criminal code has come into force, which takes into account international treaties as well as generally accepted and respected practices in criminology around the world.<sup>20</sup> This has resulted in some codified laws on *Bacha Bazi*. Not only has the practice been outlawed, but even taking part in events where *bachas* are seen dancing will be punished by the long hands of the law.

While the non-existence of specific laws on *Bacha Bazi* had been a huge impediment in trying to eradicate this practice, another glaring reason is corruption and the weak implementation of laws. Often times, there are laws, but authorities turn a blind eye to them, or take bribes to not act. It would, however, be unfair to say that none of the authorities are interested in acting against *Bacha Bazi*. Authorities find themselves in a fix when powerful people are the perpetrators of *Bacha Bazi*. These powerful people, who are often above the law for all practical purposes, manage to bypass law enforcement. Similarly, due to a perpetual state of war in Afghanistan there is an urgent need for men who fight on behalf of the state. Many people who are indicted have to be released from their imprisonment to serve on account of their experience, or due to a shortage of men in the army. This causes many crimes to be overlooked and go unpunished.

An important aspect for the thriving of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan is the weak rule of law. The rule of law in essence means that all persons, no matter how powerful, even the state, are under the ambit of the law of the state, which is fair and equal for everyone. However, in some countries, like Afghanistan, the rule of law exists only in theory. The powerful openly flout the law and go unpunished, while the weakest bear the burden of a broken system. The *bacha bereesh*, who are young and often from poor and powerless families, are not even aware of the existence of laws, let alone rely on them to protect themselves.

---

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. “UNAMA welcomes Afghanistan’s new penal code - Calls for robust framework to protect women against violence.” [online] (22 February 2018). Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unama-welcomes-afghanistan-s-new-penal-code-calls-robust-framework-protect-women> [accessed 21 Oct. 2018].

It is a welcome step that Afghanistan has tried to incorporate in its laws the modern notion of criminology and victimology followed by most developed nations. The modern view takes human right violations very seriously. The practice of *Bacha Bazi*, due to its violence, coercion, rape, torture, and long-term negative psychological impact, is a very serious offence and should attract the harshest punishment.

## ***Bacha Bazi*: The Way Forward for Afghanistan**

*Bacha Bazi* is a complex problem, often dubbed as culturally sanctioned rape. But not everyone in the deeply religious Islamic Republic of Afghanistan supports this sexual exploitation of children. Many fight against what they call—not just ethically, but also legally—a grave wrongdoing. The most ideal solution is to consolidate the voices of those people who can make themselves heard in front of the authorities to express that they will not tolerate the kidnapping and exploitation of their young sons.

The second solution is to receive help from the international community to gradually ease the situation of war in Afghanistan. Until there is a war-like situation in the country, there will be gross human rights abuses that will go unnoticed or ignored.

The third solution is to provide vocational training and to teach different skills to young boys. Many boys who become boy slaves spend all their time dancing and entertaining men. Even when they outgrow their roles, they have little or no skills, except for knowing how to dance. Providing adequate training to boys will help them choose alternative careers, find jobs, and earn money. Poverty, which is a major factor in the thriving business of *Bacha Bazi*, will also be attacked when these boys receive education and vocational training.

Strong laws, which provide for the punishment of the sexual exploitation of children, will create fear in the minds of boy slave “owners.” But it will all be an unrealized theory if the implementation of laws is not done properly. Afghanistan now has the laws, but the proper implementation and a strengthened rule of law is still missing.

## Rehabilitation of Boy Slaves

Many a times *Bacha Bazi* is consensual. The owner pays to the boy and to his family until he performs for him.<sup>21</sup> In several cases, the boy slaves who serve their masters are abused, tortured, and raped. Escape is rarely possible, unless the “masters” release them. Sometimes when *bachas* try to escape by themselves to avoid abuse, the path is fraught with danger. Since powerful men are involved, they could get killed. Even if the escape is successful, *bachas* do not gain much because they are unskilled, except in dance. They cannot go back to their families. The only thing they know is to dance and to entertain their “owners.” Often, the only feasible option is to return to the life of abuse. Tragically, that is the only career they have.

Once a boy has become a boy slave, he is considered to have sinned.<sup>22</sup> Little protection is granted to him by the state or the judiciary. *Bacha Bazi* is one of those cases when the society blames the victim more than it blames the perpetrator. Even the families are unwilling to take their boys back. Only a lucky handful is able to go back to their families, and the rest are abandoned. One former *bacha*, who was abandoned by his “owner” after he grew a beard, was abandoned by his family too.<sup>23</sup> There is no escape for these boys who often suffer from immense psychological trauma due to abuse. Most go back to prostitution or to dancing as *bachas* in parties.

In a war-ravaged nation, the lives of these children are seemingly a trivial issue for authorities. When enquired about it by a UN official, President Hamid Karzai remarked, “Let us win the war first. Then we will deal with such matters.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the practice of *Bacha Bazi*, which has been in existence for such a long time that it has seeped into the common consciousness as something

---

<sup>21</sup> Everett, “Confessions.”

<sup>22</sup> “Bacha bazi: The stolen childhood of boys turned into dancers, sex slaves in Afghanistan.” *Hindustan Times* [online]. (26 June 2017). Available from: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/bacha-bazi-the-stolen-childhood-of-boys-turned-into-dancers-sex-slaves-in-afghanistan/story-5FrGrK12PzrSRynHSfzh2N.html> [accessed 22 Oct 2018].

<sup>23</sup> “Stolen boys: Life after sexual slavery in Afghanistan.” *thejournal.ie* [online]. (1 July 2017). Available from: <http://www.thejournal.ie/sex-slave-afghanistan-bacha-bazi-children-3464413-Jul2017/> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].

<sup>24</sup> Marcia G. Yerman, “The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan Examines Sexual Abuse in Afghanistan.” *HuffPost* [online]. (2 August 2012). Available from: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-g-yerman/the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan\\_b\\_1260667.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-g-yerman/the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan_b_1260667.html) [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].

that is not liked, yet still accepted, because powerful people do it and the common ones are powerless to prevent it. Even worse, in some cases, it is justified as one of the rich traditions of a culturally rich nation. Suraya Subhrang, child rights commissioner at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), noted that earlier *Bacha Bazi* was restricted to a few “special” places, but now it has spread everywhere. It takes place in Takhar as well as the rest of the North.<sup>25</sup>

This paper has discussed the response of the international community towards this practice, which has been disappointing at best. Nations who have a strict policy against rape and pedophilia turn a blind eye to this practice in Afghanistan. In fact, the invasion of the United States has aided this crime. Now, stuck in a perpetual war-like situation, the country witnesses many human right violations and war crimes. The military commanders, who were earlier on their own, are now United States allies. Not even the NATO intervention has changed a thing; it has even made the situation worse.<sup>26</sup>

When Khaled Hosseini, a novelist from Afghanistan, wrote about *Bacha Bazi* in his best-selling novel *The Kite Runner*, many around the world was made aware of this condemnable practice. At first, there was shock regarding the unhinged brutality. Unfortunately, it did not translate into mass-scale international condemnation. What is needed now are stronger, more powerful voices that are able to shake the dark cultural history of *Bacha Bazi* far away from Afghanistan. Perhaps, a little soul searching is needed too. While we sit and discuss human rights and children rights on paper, we fail to fully understand the depravity of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan.

The paper also highlights that this issue is not Afghanistan’s problem alone. This is not solely the case of little children in Afghanistan who have been abused because the country’s culture accepts it. This is an international issue of children’s rights, rape, pedophilia, trauma, and abuse, and the international community has to wake up and take notice. The abusers may be powerful, but people’s voices, if united, are enough to defeat them. Diplomatic pressure, aid for children—providing vocational training, legal aid, and representation of children’s voices—, and other similar measures would be a great contribution to ensure that the horror of *Bacha Bazi* becomes a thing of the past. Until that happens, *Bacha Bazi* continue to be

---

<sup>25</sup> “Afghanistan’s dancing boys.” *The New Humanitarian* [online]. (18 September 2013). Available from: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/98776/afghanistans-dancing-boys> [Accessed 22 Oct. 2018].

<sup>26</sup> Sayed Hamed, “Bacha Bazi, the ugly life of Afghanistan’s ‘dancing boys.’” *The Afghan Dispatch* [online]. (9 March 2017). Available from: <https://www.afghandispatch.com/bacha-bazi/> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].

a dreadful practice staring at us right in the face. Until we take cognizance, little boys with their big eyes will continue to carry unimaginable horrors in a world with a broken system.

## References

- “Afghanistan’s dancing boys.” *The New Humanitarian* (18 September 2013). Available from: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/98776/afghanistans-dancing-boys> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].
- “Bacha Bazi: The stolen childhood of boys turned into dancers, sex slaves in Afghanistan.” *Hindustan Times* (26 June 2017). Available from: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/bacha-bazi-the-stolen-childhood-of-boys-turned-into-dancers-sex-slaves-in-afghanistan/story-5FrGrKI2PzrSRynHSfzh2N.html> [accessed 22 Oct 2018].
- “Kandahar comes out of the closet.” *Free Republic* (11 January 2002). Available from: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/606581/posts> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].
- “Stolen boys: Life after sexual slavery in Afghanistan.” *thejournal.ie* (1 July 2017). Available from: <http://www.thejournal.ie/sex-slave-afghanistan-bacha-bazi-children-3464413-Jul2017/> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].
- “Taliban use ‘honey trap’ boys to kill Afghan police.” *Dawn* (16 June 2016). Available from: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1265215> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].
- Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). “Causes and Consequences of Bacha Bazi in Afghanistan.” (18 August 2014). Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5694c3db4.html> [accessed 18 October 2018].
- Afghanistan Penal Code, Article 427.
- Agence France-Presse. “Kabul to investigate child sex slavery fuelling insider attacks.” *The Telegraph* (28 June 2016). Available from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/28/kabul-to-investigate-child-sex-slavery-fuelling-insider-attacks/> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].
- Chopra, Anuj. “Taliban use ‘honey trap’ boys to kill Afghan police.” *Yahoo News* (16 June 2016). Available from: <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/taliban-honey-trap-boys-kill-afghan-police-https://sg.news.yahoo.com/taliban-honey-trap-boys-kill-afghan-police-034032058.html> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].
- Everett, Will. “Confessions of an Afghan Boy Sex Slave.” *Newsweek* (30 May 2015). Available from: <https://www.newsweek.com/confessions-afghan-boy-sex-slave-337381> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].
- Hamed, Sayed. “Bacha Bazi, the ugly life of Afghanistan’s ‘dancing boys’.” *The Afghan Dispatch* (9 March 2017). Available from: <https://www.afghandispatch.com/bacha-bazi/> [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].



- Human Rights Watch. "World Report 2014: Afghanistan." *Human Rights Watch* (n.d.). Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/afghanistan>.
- Human Terrain Team. "Pashtun Sexuality." (n.d.). Available from: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/HTT-PashtunSexuality.pdf> [accessed 21 Oct. 2018].
- Kaur, Harjot and Najla Ayubi. "Status of Women in Afghanistan." *The Asia Foundation* (21 January 2009). Available from: <https://asiafoundation.org/2009/01/21/status-of-women-in-afghanistan/> [accessed 1 Feb. 2019].
- Legal Information Institute. "22 U.S. Code § 2378d - Limitation on assistance to security forces." (n.d.). Available from: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2378d>
- Mondloch, Chris. "Bacha Bazi: An Afghan Tragedy." *Foreign Policy* (28 October 2013). Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/28/bacha-bazi-an-afghan-tragedy/> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].
- Qobil, Rustam. "The sexually abused dancing boys of Afghanistan." *BBC News* (8 September 2019). Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11217772> [accessed 19 Oct. 2018].
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). *Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces*. (2018). Available from: <https://sigar.mil/pdf/inspections/SIGAR%2017-47-IP.pdf> [accessed 20 Oct. 2018].
- United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. "UNAMA welcomes Afghanistan's new penal code - Calls for robust framework to protect women against violence." (22 February 2018). Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unama-welcomes-afghanistan-s-new-penal-code-calls-robust-framework-protect-women> [accessed 21 Oct. 2018].
- United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC). "The dancing boys of Afghanistan." (19 March 2018). Available from: <https://www.unric.org/en/latest-un-buzz/29091-the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan> [accessed 18 Oct. 2018].
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). "USCIRF Annual Report 2014 - Tier 2: Afghanistan." (30 April 2014). Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5369e5b310.html> [accessed 22 October 2018].
- Yerman, Marcia G. "The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan Examines Sexual Abuse in Afghanistan." *HuffPost* (2 August 2012). Available from: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-g-yerman/the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan\\_b\\_1260667.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-g-yerman/the-dancing-boys-of-afghanistan_b_1260667.html) [accessed 22 Oct. 2018].