Breaking the Stigma against Child Sex Trafficking and Bacha Bazi in Afghanistan

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1. Global Problem

1.1 Introduction

Human trafficking can be defined as the harbouring, transport, recruitment or receipt of persons by means of force, deception, abduction, and abuse for the purpose of exploitation. Human trafficking as a whole, has been acknowledged in 124 countries across the globe according to a global report about human trafficking, released in 2014 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)\(^1\). Not only has human trafficking been seen in lesser developed countries but also in countries such as the United States and many European countries. This problem spans the whole globe with offenders and many nations transporting individuals across borders.\(^1\)

An extended trafficking network has developed with men, women and children being transported across national and international borders. Like many other illegal actions, this disturbing practice has advanced into an epidemic that is fueled by the opportunity for perpetrators to gain a substantial amount of money. In 2005 alone, the global trafficking net profited an estimated $44.3 billion.\(^2\) It would only be natural to think that with such a geologic and economic global spread, catching large-scale human traffickers would not be so difficult. However, on average there are only 10 convictions for human trafficking annually per country.

With such a substantial global presence of human trafficking, as illustrated by the data set provided by the UNODC, it is alarming how few convictions occur. Due to this inconsistency, there has been an increased interest in the conviction of traffickers and the liberation of those being trafficked. As a result of this effort, human trafficking has been reported in all 50 states in the U.S.\(^3\)

About half of all people trafficked are bought for forced labor, while most others are trafficked specifically for sexual exploitation. However, it is not only women who are being trafficked. In fact, only 49% of trafficked individuals are women, while 18% are men and 33% are children. Just within
the past three years there has been a substantial 5% rise in child trafficking. In most areas there are more adults trafficked than children, but in Africa and the Middle East, children make up an average of 62% of victims.1

1.2 Effects

Universally, child victims of sex-trafficking face serious health repercussions due to their environment, the practices in which they are forced to participate, and the mistreatment to which they are exposed during the time of their imprisonment. Due to the illegal and often discrete nature of trafficking, activities often ensue in unregulated environments that lack sanitation and proper access to hygiene and healthcare. According to a document released by the UNODC, “[trafficked] children in some tropical regions are at high risk of sunstroke, increased heart rhythm, poisoning due to chemicals in insecticides, dust inhalation in sawmills and mines, machinery accidents, burns, road accidents, stagnation of growth and general fatigue.” 4

Additionally, traffickers often limit the food intake of victims in order to minimize the costs of keeping workers while maximizing their margin of profit. This limitation can lead to serious health effects such as malnutrition and even malnourishment, conditions that can seriously impede development of a young child and result in symptoms such as decreased immune system, cognitive delays, and retardation of bone growth.5

Child prostitutes are often forced to repetitively participate in abusive sexual activities including but not limited to intercourse, oral penetration, and anal penetration. These abusive encounters are responsible for countless physical and mental traumas to the victim. To begin with, victims are at an inflated risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases: in a study by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, “50-90% of children rescued from brothels in parts of southeast Asia are infected with HIV.”6 Other infections, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and chancreoid are just a fraction of the potential STD’s to which victims are exposed on a daily basis. Figure 2 provides the findings of a study published in the Canadian Journal of Infectious Disease and illustrates the prevalence of different sexually transmitted diseases in juvenile prostitutes versus other populations.7
The actual acts of sexual abuse to the children can result in various injuries and traumas such as bone fractures/breaks, sterilization, genital tissue damage, tears, burns, and more. Other secondary physical damages can result from forced abortions, rough treatment and reprimanding by traffickers.

On a mental and psychological level, massive damage is sustained by victims and these symptoms and mental disorders are often carried with children well into adulthood. According to a study carried out by professors from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Seattle Pacific University, the two main mental effects sustained by children who are trafficked are symptoms of severe trauma due to systematic abuse, and feelings of numbness/dissociation as a coping mechanism. Results of these overarching themes of mental illness can include panic attacks, anxiety, lack of trust, depression, self mutilation, addiction, and more.

On a broader scale, the child sex trafficking trade is a substantial detrimental entity to the global economy in three main areas. To begin with, public health costs are massive due to high rates of morbidity and mortality and the need for lifelong counseling and treatment for most victims. Secondly, lack of education and premature deaths also contribute to lost resources for future productivity. Finally, human trafficking is a large market that is conducted illegally (in most countries): not only does the trade evade taxation, but its illicit nature also results in the unregulated movement of large sums of money into and out of different national economies.
2. Problem in Afghanistan

2.1 Historical Context of Bacha Bazi

There is a prolonged tradition of child trafficking in Afghanistan that has been in existence for hundreds of years. Boys aged 11 or 12 are picked off of the street, and are then taken into the ownership of wealthy traffickers. In some cases, the parents of these boys are consulted, and a large sum of cash is awarded to the parents in the child’s “services.” The slang term given to this act is “bacha bazi,” meaning “boy play” in Persian. The perpetrators are referred to as “bacha baz.” Bacha bazi originated from the people of the Pashtun tribe in Afghanistan. It is culturally accepted as they believe that “Women are for children; boys are for pleasure.” However this is against sharia (Islamic) law, so it was illegal under the rule of the Taliban from 1993-2001, and was considered to be socially unacceptable and a disgrace to Allah. Although it is still illegal, without pressure from the Taliban it is socially acceptable within the Pashtun once again, with little law enforcement occurring to stop it. After Taliban rule came to an end, warlords from Afghanistan’s civil war in the 1980’s called the mujahideen were put back into power, and also rekindled the bacha bazi tradition.

Boys are targeted if a bacha baz feels that they are particularly attractive and poor enough so that the family will agree for the boy to fall under the man’s “apprenticeship” and ownership. The boys are then taken and trained by musicians to be able to sing and dance in order to entertain men who wish to pay to see them and possibly spend the night with them. The duties of these boys can consist of, but are not limited to, pornography, prostitution, dancing and singing. Before boys are made to “perform” in front of a group a Pashtun men, they are dressed in women’s clothing that is adorned in bells and apply makeup. DVDs of these performances featuring bacha bazi are regularly available on street corners in Afghanistan, broadcasting the faces of the victims for the whole region to see. Past the age of 18 when a boy reaches adulthood, bacha baz become disinterested, seeing the old boys as undesirable and relieved of their duties of servitude.

2.2 Psychological Effects

Bacha bazi’s focus on the sexual exploitation of young males yields the damages laid out in section 1.2, as well as damages specific to this particular practice. In terms of physical trauma, “most cases result in some form of grievous physical injury due to rape trauma including internal/anal haemorrhaging, rectal prolapse, protrusion of intestines, displaced pelvis bones, throat injuries, heavy internal bleeding, rectal wall tearing, as well as injuries that stem from the pure force of coercion. These include broken limbs, broken fingers, fractures, broken teeth, savage beatings, strangulation, asphyxiation, and in some cases death.”
Physical damage unrelated to rape trauma is also common, and stems from abuse by caretakers and drug/alcohol addictions taken on as coping mechanisms for abuse.

Victims of bacha bazi and similar practices in Afghanistan also endure social stigma and public shame both during and after their release from their abusers. Because the practice of bacha bazi involves public displays of victims during parties and dance performances, social isolation and stigmatization of these children is inflated more so than many other child prostitution practices. This isolation can lead to serious psychological damage to the child in addition to harming their future job prospects and relationships. Moreover, partnered with the poverty of the areas in which this “tradition” takes place, bacha bazi can contribute to a cycle of abuse in which the abused become the abuser.14

2.3 Societal Effects

In addition to the horrific damage sustained by children forced to participate in the practice of bacha bazi, detrimental societal repercussions of this “tradition” occur as well. By sequestering children away from society, traffickers prevent youth from achieving an education. In the rare situation that bacha bazi victims can attend school, their success and cognitive functioning would be severely stunted due to the repeated abuse they undergo.

Another significant societal effect of bacha bazi is the strain the practice puts on the families (particularly the wives) of the men who participate in the practice. According to a San Francisco Gate Article, “Even after marriage, many men keep their boys, suggesting a loveless life at home.” In interviews with several Pashtun men, statements such as “the only time you interact with your wife is on Friday, the rest of the time it’s chai boys” and “I was playing with my boy every night and was away from home, eventually my wife decided to leave me. I am happy with my decision, because I am used to sleeping and entertaining with my young boy” demonstrate the impact of bacha bazi on marriages.15

2.4 Effects of War

It must be stressed that Afghanistan is one of the most impoverished countries in the world. The major economic activity of the country is agriculture; however, this sector has been disturbed from conflict for more than 3 decades. The country has been a scene of continuous conflicts since the invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979, which affected the majority of Afghans who depended on agriculture for their livelihood.16 Today, the government suspects that more than 30% of the population lives under the national poverty line and 20% is on the edge of falling under that line.17
For an average Afghan, life is very difficult and stricken with economic struggle, food insecurity and many other problems.

On top of generating agricultural difficulties, the war has caused an estimation of 1 million widows with an average age of 35, leaving them by average with at least four kids to take care of.\textsuperscript{18} In Afghanistan’s strictly patriarchal society, without the protection of a husband, a widow suffers from social exclusion. Many of them are no longer considered desirable by men, and therefore are not qualified to marry again. This leaves widows no other option than to become beggars, consequently affecting their children. Even when not comprised of a single widow, many rural households have to take care of one or more disabled member.\textsuperscript{3} In either case, every family member, including children, needs to find a way to contribute to their household’s income.

In Afghanistan, a UNICEF estimation of the percentage of children aged 5-14 suggests that at least 30\% were involved in illegal child labor in 2011.\textsuperscript{19} Around a quarter or more of all young children in the country were being forced to work, therefore missing out on much of their childhood, and, most importantly, a proper education. Only a minority of children are enrolled in primary school in Afghanistan. Specifically, 43\% of boys are enrolled in primary school, while only 31\% of girls are. Even in Afghanistan’s most educated province, Kabul, the overall literacy rate is 47\%.\textsuperscript{20} While officials understand how unacceptable these low enrollment rates are, children are nevertheless used much like slaves, being forced to participate in illegal activities like prostitution. Families in despair, who can’t afford to send a functional member to school while they could be working, are forced to accept the deals bacha bazi traffickers propose. Kids who can’t go to school have no other option than finding money for their family. Vulnerable orphans or street children from poor or abusive families are often targeted by unscrupulous traffickers. Hence poverty, caused by war, is one of the main reasons why child trafficking perpetuates as an ongoing issue.

### 2.5 Broken Judiciary System

In his 2010 documentary entitled: \textit{The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan}, reporter Najibullah Quraishi travelled to northern Afghanistan to film the process of bacha bazi.\textsuperscript{21} He provided a simple cover story explaining his intentions to help distinguish the act in Afghanistan from that in Europe, winning the cooperation of an Afghani warlord named Dastager. In just a few days, Quraishi had acquired footage on the recruitment of boys, parties where they would dance, and interviews with the boys and their powerful owners. He also found numerous vendors on the streets selling tapes of dancing parties and pederasty.

To Quraishi’s surprise, the numerous law enforcement officials whom he interviewed denied the existence of bacha bazi in northern Afghanistan, claiming officers were continually on patrol to punish any of its participants.\textsuperscript{21}
On the contrary, on the very night of those interviews, Quraishi found numerous officers in attendance of a bacha bazi party, including the chief of police. Dastager, the warlord who owned multiple baches, demonstrated his power to the reporter by calling officers to protect another party of his own. Obviously, corruption prevents much legal action from taking place within Afghanistan, for the very individuals responsible for perpetrating these criminals are participants of bacha bazi as well. Moreover, when one police officer was accused of killing a boy who refused to give consent to sexual intercourse with him, the officer was only imprisoned for a few months until someone paid off his bail.21

A 2010 report performed by the International Crisis Group provided a summary on the current deficiencies in Afghanistan’s judicial system. It explained the judicial system’s shrinking number of participants: “Insecurity, lack of proper training and low salaries have driven many judges and prosecutors from their jobs. Those who remain are highly susceptible to corruption. Indeed, there is very little that is systematic about the legal system, and there is little evidence that the Afghan government has the resources or political will to tackle the challenge.”22

The system is especially reeling from the overbearing executive branch, which obtains its many powers from a 2004 constitution, effectively transforming “the court into a puppet of President Hamid Karzai” (now President Ashraf Ghani).22 On both the local and national scales, courts have lost their powers to the rich and endowed. In fact, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 166th out of 168 countries in its 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.23 In Quraishi’s documentary, the mother of a boy recruited in bacha bazi admitted, “If only these people were punished, this kind of thing wouldn’t happen.”21 Authorities have treated bacha bazi as a taboo subject, not to be mentioned in conversation. This has allowed the practice to spread unhindered, leading men who believe they are beyond the reach of morality and the law to kidnap children and use them for their own sexual pleasures.

2.6 Foreign Stagnancy to the Issue

In September of 2015, members of the Obama administration stated that bacha bazi in Afghanistan is “abhorrent,” yet “fundamentally” a local “law enforcement matter.” Moreover, according to Human Events, when a White House spokesperson was questioned whether President Obama was taking steps to examine his military’s treatment of members who abuse local children while on deployment, the representative responded: “Not that I’m aware of.”24 Individuals aware of the struggles facing the people of Afghanistan may find Obama’s laissez faire approach to child sex trafficking frustrating. Perhaps his administration avoids the issue due to its stigmatic nature; or perhaps his administration sees that Afghanistan already ranks on the top of its list of countries to which the U.S. has given aid and has determined that their responsibilities are fulfilled.
Yet, as Lindy Cameron, a representative for Britain’s Department for International Development in Kabul, explained, “80% of its aid money is spent through Afghan government channels,” meaning most of the aid received never directly benefits the Afghan economy. Not only is Afghanistan experiencing a brain drain of sorts, or the migration of many highly skilled and intelligent workers, but it hardly receives aid in any of the areas that require the most reform. With such a broken judicial system, Afghanistan deserves to receive aid that reinvests in the core strengthening of Afghan law enforcement.
3. Solutions

3.1 Judicial and Honor-Driven Solutions

The International Crisis Group developed a list of recommendations aimed to repair Afghanistan’s broken justice system. To the government of Afghanistan, the group proposed the following actions:

➢ Reform the Afghan constitution to clarify powers, establish checks and balances, and increase political participation;
➢ Invest in the education and training of legal professionals;
➢ Judge one’s worth for senior positions by merit, not power;
➢ Ensure the security of judicial staff and witnesses from obstructors of justice;
➢ Clarify the criteria for investigations on corruption.

The group also proposed many actions for the United States and its NATO partners:

➢ Redirect financial assistance towards the formal justice sector;
➢ Support judicial reform by aiding the government in:
  ○ implementing better recruitment programs,
  ○ enforcing regular personnel assessments,
  ○ establishing systematic construction of judicial centers and prisons;
➢ Align Afghanistan to the internationally standard detention practices to prevent courts from performing shady actions beyond official court proceedings.

The report admits that even with these reforms, an improved Afghan judicial system would fail to reach many Afghan people, especially in rural areas.

On the contrary, during the time period when the Islamic fundamentalist group known as the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, from 1996 to 2001, the practice of bacha bazi was heavily punishable by federal law. In fact, the Taliban was in part born “out of public anger that local commanders had married baches and were engaging in other morally licentious behavior.” The Taliban enforced strict Islamic law, which prevents sodomy and pre-marital sex. Punishment for participation in bacha bazi usually involved execution. Ever since the banishment of the Taliban from ultimate federal rule, the practice has been revitalized, still defying sharia law but hardly sought after by law enforcers.

The laws established by the Taliban attest to the possibility for an effective government strategy to eliminate these practices. Sharia law forced bacha bazi to run underground and retard; thus, a reformed Afghan constitution and justice system could do the same. Of course, no government should aim to mimic the specific actions of the Taliban, especially in its use of violence that often violated many human rights. A reformed justice system should thereby adapt the successful surveillance and enforcement techniques from the Taliban to a plan consistent with the
United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, others suggest that Afghan and global citizens have roles to play in producing a cultural change as well.

Author Kwame Anthony Appiah develops his theory on moral revolutions in his book, *The Honor Code*. He considers three historical examples of immoral practices that once represented metrics of honor but were later overturned through moral revolutions. Appiah then applies the lessons of those examples to recommending a way to terminate the practice of honor killing found primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In a similar fashion, we may apply those lessons to ending the rampant bacha bazi found in Afghanistan.27

In the style of Appiah, we summarize that the current standard for honor within the honor world of elite Afghan men includes the number of bachas (boys) to which one has access; and the Afghan people have not placed much emphasis on an individual achieving honor by upholding sharia law or by punishing its abusers. We recommend that the Afghan people reevaluate their definitions of honor by appealing to a communal sense of honor. Similarly to how the Chinese ended footbinding by convincing the populace that the practice was a disgrace to all of China, especially when viewed by foreign observers, the population of Afghanistan should work to appeal to a communal identity. As Appiah writes, “One route to change… [means] persuading people that their honor practice [brings] collective dishonor on them, in the face of a wider honor world. This is the strategy of collective shaming.”27

Moreover, foreign observers can enforce this idea by expressing disappointment in the continuation of such as diabolical act as bacha bazi in Afghanistan. However, as Appiah stresses, the outside world must not act in such a way as to appear uncomprehending to the culture and religion of the Afghan people. Otherwise, all of the work meant to expel bacha bazi could instead fuel a nationalist revolt that values bacha bazi as its defiant action against an ignorant world. Rather, Appiah explains the usefulness of appealing to the very morals that underlie Afghan law and culture: Islam. “Insisting that honor killing is un-Islamic—that the shame attaches not to Islam but to [Afghanistan] and its failure to enforce the very Muslim ideals that its constitution claims are at the heart of the nation’s project—is, for that reason, crucial.”27

### 3.2 Domestic Solutions

The UN’s International Labor Organization (ILO) states modern slavery and trafficking is now the second-largest criminal industry in the world, with annual profits from forced labor at around $150 billion.29 In fact, it is estimated that 20.9 million people across the world are victims of modern day slavery, forced to work in servitude.29
Though the statistics concerning child labor are vague and incomplete, an increasing number of organizations and nations are rising up to help put an end to child labor. For instance, the organization End Child Prostitution & Child Pornography And Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) is a global network of organization working to eliminate child sexual labor.\(^{30}\) It is indeed an impactful organization which serves in 82 countries; however, Afghanistan is not included. Bachas captive in a form of sexual slavery are not seen as an issue by the Afghan police despite the practice’s illegality. The lack of statistics available regarding bacha bazi is a source of great concern to organizations such as the ECPAT, preventing them from fully intervening in the issue. Therefore, it is vital that some organization commence on the war against child sex trafficking in order to lead the way for more organizations to follow and make a substantial change. For instance, the U.S. Labor Department acts as a leader in the stand against child labor: one of its recent reports states that Brazil has followed and no longer relies on child labor for coal production; likewise, India and other countries have started anti-poverty programs to help end child labor.\(^{31}\) The United States has the pivotal ability to guide the world towards a better future for the children of Afghanistan.

This trend of bacha bazi cannot be allowed to continue anymore. In order to end child trafficking of innocent Afghan boys, we are the ones capable of making a change by speaking up. Despite the fact that the 2009 Nobel Prize winner President Obama said “It's on us,” the U.S. government is not addressing any substantive action regarding this topic.\(^{32}\) As the holder of the position of a global leader, the U.S. government is responsible to educate the world of the plight Afghanistan is facing and advocate change in Afghan government policy. There must be a public demand for Afghanistan to pass and enforce laws to respect the rights of children facing persecution.

In order for such an uphold to happen, the U.S. government needs to be aware of the topic and the concerns its citizens have. A human rights organization based in Canada, One Free World International (OFWI), has taken action to raise awareness for the bacha bazi issue in Afghanistan.\(^{33}\) OFWI has links to send letters directly to multiple relevant officials in the U.S. to claim your support.\(^{34}\) Many voices are required to initiate a sanction for child trafficking in Afghanistan, and establish a peaceful life for children.
4. Bibliography


