

Bacha Posh: The cultural practice of “girls living as boys” in Afghanistan

Bacha Posh is Persian/Dari word which means “dressed up as a boy”. The cultural practice of Bacha Posh documented since one century ago. The King Habibullah Khan who ruled Afghanistan from 1901-1919 asked his youngest daughter to dress up as men to guard his harem. This term got first introduced by [Jenny Nordberg's book](#) (2014) *“The Underground Girls of Kabul. The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys”*. In her book, she reveals that the tradition of Bacha Posh is embedded in the cultural, not religion, the practice of Afghanistan. The underlying theory of this practice is initiated when there was a need for boy or men at the time of war, however, gradually it evolved to fillup the different “void”. In the contemporary period of Afghanistan, the practise of Bacha Posh prevails among the families of all the across the province, tribes and socio-economic class that have no male heir. It fits into “informal structures” of the Afghanistan Society. The term refers to the “system of knowledge shared by Afghan women”.

The foreign scholars or the Afghan men do not understand the desperation of son that is mostly shared within the private lives of Afghan women, among the other women and midwives. The reason for the desperation is the standing of women will have in the Afghan society that is determined by her ability to bear a male child. Nordberg further exemplified on the practice that in Afghanistan *“There is no social security, little health care and virtually no rule of law. There is just unemployment, poverty and constant war. In this environment, the number of sons equals a family's strength.... They are insurance”*. However, a female child is a property, a commodity that's passed to one male to another. A ceremony is held called Nashrah wherein the birth of male child and mother is celebrated through music, prayer and gifts. On contrary, the birth of daughter welcomes mockery for mother and father. The women get labelled as [dokhtar zai](#), or “she who only brings daughters” and its counterpart is ridiculed as *mada posht* or “he whose woman will only deliver girls”

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The domestic and western media has condemned this practice because the contradiction that is “*girl dressing up as a boy*” is overwhelming for them. However, Nadia Hashmi (the global actor) deconstructed the practice through the pragmatic approach which she reflected in her book “*Pearl that Broke Its Shell*”. Nadia Hashmi is an Afghani-American paediatrician, a former Democratic congressional candidate for the United States House of Representatives for Maryland’s 6th congressional district, and a famous novelist. She has authored three international best-selling novels. Her debut novel - *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* - in 2014 gained her prominence worldwide since she highlights the secretive traditional practice of Bacha Posh: [a gender-bending practice in Afghanistan](#) through a fictional story of two women. The book tells the story about a young girl Rahima who was dressed up and lived as a boy since her parents had no sons until she reached her puberty. The Bacha Posh allowed her freedom which she could not dream of as an Afghan girl. Gradually, the story goes into the narrative of her great-great-grandmother who dressed up as a man in the early century. In her story, Nadia Hashmi focusses on the history of the tradition of Bacha Posh’s origin, an era where a woman was dressed to guard the king’s Harem.

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This photograph taken on March 20, 2018, shows Afghan female labourer Sitara Wafadar (C), 18, who dresses as a male in order to support her family, at her home in Sultanpur village in Surkh Rod district, in Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province. Sitara Wafadar yearns for long hair like other girls. Instead, the Afghan teenager has disguised herself as a boy for more than a decade, forced by her parents to be the “son” they never had. / AFP PHOTO / Noorullah SHIRZADA / TO GO WITH Afghanistan-children-gender, FEATURE by Noorullah Shirzada

Even though she had acknowledged that this practice is problematic there are other good reasons to practice Bacha Posh. Whilst through the gender lens she wanted to address the crisis the ‘boy’ goes through in the transitioning process to a girl rather than just looking at the practice under the light of black and white. When Nadia Hashmi explored bacha posh practice, she asked [the most crucial question](#)- what will happen to the ‘boy’ when she will hit the puberty? What will be the life of a woman after experiencing all the liberties which she enjoyed in the practice of Bacha Posh? What all in the life she has to bear in future? Moreover, it is essential to notice that the practice of Bacha Posh tradition serves two sides of the coin. Firstly, it is, primarily, practised in bringing honour to the family as a

new son thereby she is proudly presented among the community disguised as a guy. The process of altering the daughter into son is done by changing their name, attire and hair cut conforming to the physical features of a boy. Bacha Posh, simultaneously, learn to behave and act like a boy.

The [community accepts the charade](#) openly because there is a collective understanding that family needs honour and a breadwinner besides this new son gets the credit for fulfilling the superstition that is - the practice of Bacha Posh will bring a son to the family in future. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society that follows the system of suppressive gender segregation where a girl has little value. The time the girl is born in the family she is always guarded and escorted with few rights and little autonomy to make her own decision. She must follow [typical toxic feminine behaviour](#) and constantly must appear modest. Therefore, this practice of Bacha Posh has simultaneously helped her that is the freedom from segregation which got strangulated due to her birth sex. It has opened the new world for these girls where there is freedom of movement, to attend schools, to run a daily errand and ability to support the family. Many well- off and open-minded afghan families practice this tradition to make their girls confident and autonomous individuals where they can look into the eyes of people and shout at top of their lungs. This opened her with an opportunity to experience those things which she could not have gotten it as a girl. However, all being done oblivious to a young girl child.

Consequentially there is a drawback of Bacha Posh practice, irrespective of whether this practice is morally correct or not, is a transition that is quite abrupt as supported by Nadia Hashmi in the interview taken by [Foreign Affairs media](#). This transition process is quite abnormal since suddenly they are told to dress up like women, behave like women, all the liberty and freedom they have enjoyed get snatched away with the snap of the fingers. Nadia explains that these girls are not prepared for this traditional or cultural practice, hence they go through a mental hardship. Since they were being brought up in the family that has a lot of sisters, they knew the life of the girl, but they are not taught anything about it. But as these girls grow up, they face a gender identity crisis that is unable to relate themselves with any gender as associated by the society. While some of them got the liberty to remain as they are even after entering puberty but most of them do not have this choice. When these former Bacha Posh experienced women reach the marriageable age, they are less preferred by the families as their daughter in law. Since the latter believe that they will not be the same as other afghan girls being meek and timid additionally when the former Bacha Posh gets married her freedom and [self-confidence gets stripped away](#).

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Image source: Nat Geo

The tradition of practising Bacha Posh illustrates constrictive non-conforming gender norms which are allowed until it is restricted to disguise but not as biological phenomena. It is quite ironical that family yearning for a boy instead of the girl seems to readily accept her cross-dressing. However, after a few years, the family and society will have a contemptuous perspective when the puberty begins since it makes them look more transsexual as their physical appearance change which is anti-Islamic for the community. However, in the contemporary time of Afghanistan, there are some cases where former Bacha Posh are desired for marriage since they are strong and autonomous. Also, there are cases where Bacha Posh after entering the [puberty they admire themselves and not getting bothered](#) about their gender.

Nadia Hashimi supported the aforementioned, as she founded the unseen benefit in the practice of Bacha posh tradition. This tradition has instilled the feeling of entitlement and aspiration among the bacha posh and the other girls around them. She advocates this statement by supplying real-life examples of former bacha posh lives. [Azita Razaat, a former](#)

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[bacha posh](#), went on to become an educated parliamentarian. Bibi Hakmeena similarly became a mujahideen fighter and then a politician. A third former bacha posh became a provincial head of Afghanistan’s Women’s Affairs Department. She has also mentioned a story about how former bacha posh wife was able to retaliate to her husband when he physically abused her. Thus, it creates a significant impact on the society where adult women can barely achieve the status of second-class citizen.



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