

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	499
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN).
Titel:	Afghanistan's Dancing Boys.
Udgivet:	18. september 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. oktober 2013

Afghanistan's dancing boys



Photo: Wikipedia Commons

Music and dance are important aspects of cultural life in Afghanistan

NANGAHAR, 18 September 2013 (IRIN) - Sexual exploitation of boys, in particular the practice of "bacha bazi" (literally boy play) in which boys are "owned" for dancing and sex, remains one of the least talked about abuses in Afghanistan.

It is an age-old custom, banned by the Taliban when they were in power, but now undergoing a resurgence.

"Before, bacha bazi was in some special areas, but now it is everywhere. It is happening in Takhar [province] and the rest of the north," the child rights commissioner at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Suraya Subhrang, told IRIN.

"When you don't have a strong central government or rule of law, and the culture of impunity exists and laws are not implemented, many things happen."

The influence of warlords, wealthy merchants and illegal armed groups supports demand, while poverty and the sheer number of displaced children drives the supply of exploitable boys. They are released when they

are aged around 18, but their future is often bleak.

They are usually enticed or abducted when they are still children and held as property by an "owner".

Many "owners" vehemently deny they sexually abuse the boys, but after a bacha performance, the boys can end the evening being abused by a group of men.

A former commander in the Northern Alliance, opposed to the then Taliban government, who did not wish to be identified, told IRIN he had kept a 14-year-old bacha for two years. He had not given the boy a salary but paid all of his expenses, which amounted to US\$300-400 a month. "There are two types of boys: those who can dance well and are kept for entertainment, and those who can't and are kept only for sexual purposes. I kept my boy for sex," he said.

Campaigners say they repeatedly come across cases of exploitation but the perpetrators have little awareness of child rights, or that they are involved in coercion and sexual violence.

DVDs of young boys dressed as women performing at weddings and other events are available on the streets of Kabul or via YouTube.

Efforts to raise awareness

In 2009, the UN tried to raise awareness of the issue, but Afghanistan is a highly conservative country, where homosexuality is taboo, heterosexual relations are strictly controlled and bacha bazi has deep cultural roots. "If as much attention went into bacha bazi [as women's rights] I am sure you would see a difference, but no one speaks about it," said an analyst who asked not to be named.

"It is time to openly confront this practice and to put an end to it. Religious leaders in Afghanistan appealed to me to assist them in combating these activities. Laws should be passed, campaigns must be waged and perpetrators should be held accountable and punished," the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, told the General Assembly.

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The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has highlighted the practice a number of times, said spokesman Alistair Gretarsson, including in the recent Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council.

Gretarsson and other aid workers told IRIN the victims are generally extremely reluctant to report abuse for fear of stigma, honour killings or reprisals. In some cases, the boys - not the perpetrators - are charged with homosexuality or other crimes. "The boy will never say, 'This person had sex with me,' said an Afghan aid worker in eastern Nangarhar province.

"In the district areas of Nangarhar there are no awareness programmes or education on this issue, which is one of the main reasons why people are involved in this practice." For significant change to take place, say campaigners, traditional people of standing in local communities - religious scholars, tribal elders and government officials - will need to take a stand against the abuse of boys.

Life of a bacha

The practice thrives in rural areas among powerful officials and militia commanders - those with enough money and influence to ignore and escape the justice system. But it also exists in cities among the rich and powerful elite.

"We were not taking the boys by force, they were coming themselves," said the man from Kunduz province. "[They] would mostly choose the... [man] who is most powerful to stay with, but if you abuse them or don't pay them enough they will leave you for someone else."

A 17-year-old bacha boy from an impoverished village in Sangin district, southern Helmand province, told IRIN, "My parents know what I am doing but they do not have much to say because the men who keep boys have so much power - they fear no one." He said keeping boys is so prevalent in the south that there are "no problems" associated with the practice.

The boy said he liked what he was doing, but the most obvious reason seemed to be money - raising the question of how willing the "consent" can be in the case of an adolescent from a poor background.

"I was unemployed and they offered me things I don't have," he said. "The men that have bachas have to be able to provide everything necessary for a good life - for example, money, a car, beautiful clothes, and things like this. I have everything I need now, compared to my home in the village, which had nothing."

Some boys have sexual relations with just one man, while others have sex with multiple partners, said the former commander from northern Kunduz province. "It all depends on the boy. There might be a group of five or 10 men who can sleep with him... but the boy does not allow everyone."

But analysts point out that many bacha boys have been kidnapped, traded as a valuable commodity, and threatened with the death of family members should they try to escape.

The glamour associated with bacha and the focus on "dancing" hides the undercurrents of sexual violence and paedophilia. In most villages, people know who the bacha are. They become "famous", said the aid worker in Nangarhar province.

The money, clothes and nearness to power can give them status among their peers, but the rape and abuse they have endured can also stigmatize them in the wider community. Being marked out and known encourages their exploitation by, among others, members of the Afghan security forces stationed in the

countryside.

"The Afghan army... go into a district for six or seven months; it is not their home; they are young, some newly married, and can't go without sex for seven months, so they [use money, clothes, gifts to] motivate the boys and girls in the area," said the aid worker.

In rural Afghanistan it is forbidden for men and women to be seen together in public. Men and women caught having sex outside of marriage can be put to death. "Mingling of men [and boys] is less conspicuous," said Thomas Ruttig of the Afghanistan Analysts Network's (AAN). "It looks as if boys are forced into becoming 'dancing boys' in most of the cases, probably also being unaware what it involves."

Like the former commander from Kunduz, most men who keep boys have wives. During the day they may be with the boy and at night they return home. It is not uncommon for such men to wed their daughters to their former 'boys' and then continue the relationship surreptitiously, according to Subhrang of AIHRC.

The former commander says he now knows he did wrong, but when he runs into the bacha he once owned, the boy never mentions their previous relationship. "He doesn't have the courage because he is too ashamed."

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