

# **Cultural and International Dissonance on Girls Empowerment: the Case of Afghanistan's Female Son**

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## **ABSTRAK**

*Bacha Posh adalah istilah Dari yang berarti sastra "gadis berpakaian seperti anak laki-laki. Anak perempuan yang lahir dalam keluarga tanpa anak laki-laki harus menyamar sebagai anak laki-laki di bawah tekanan sosial atau ekonomi. Pengaturan ini berakhir ketika gadis tersebut mencapai pubertas karena harus kembali ke jenis kelamin kelahirannya dan menikah. Artikel ini menggarisbawahi ketidakcocokan antara wacana internasional dan wacana budaya tentang anak perempuan. Komunitas internasional sering menggambarkan anak perempuan sebagai penduduk tak berdaya dengan kapasitas dan agensi yang sangat terbatas. Bacha Posh membuktikan hal yang sebaliknya. Mereka berperan sebagai penggambaran gadis-gadis Afghanistan yang dengan cerdas menolak norma masyarakat yang kaku di negara yang rapuh dimana memiliki anak-anak memiliki keamanan yang setara. Melalui kehidupan bacha posh, artikel ini ingin mengungkap apa artinya menjadi anak perempuan di Afghanistan pasca perang dimana masyarakat internasional terus berusaha untuk mengajar orang Afghanistan tentang gender dan hak asasi manusia.*

**Kata kunci:** *Bacha Posh, Anak Perempuan, Penguatan, Afghanistan*

## **ABSTRACT**

Bacha Posh is a *Dari* term which literary means "girls dressed as boys. Girls who were born in a family without son must disguise themselves as boys under social or economic pressure. This arrangement end when the girl reaches puberty as she has to turn back to her birth gender and get married. This article underlines incongruence between international discourse and cultural discourse on girl child. International community often depicts girl child as helpless population with very limited capacity and agency. *Bacha Posh* is proving just the opposite. They serve as a portrayal of Afghan girls who cleverly resisting the rigid societal norms in the fragile country where having sons equal security. Through the lives of the *bacha posh*, this article wishes to unveil what it means to be girls in the post-war Afghanistan where the international community has persistently been trying to teach Afghans about gender and human rights.

**Keywords:** *Bacha Posh, Girl Child, Empowerment, Afghanistan.*

## Introduction

*"Mehran first arrived here... as Mahnoush, in pigtails and a pistachio dress. When school shut down for a break she left and never returned. Instead short-haired, tie-wearing Mehran began first grade with the other children." (Nordberg, 2014, p. 55)*

She is a *Bacha posh*, a *Dari* term which means "girls dressed as boys" (Manoori & Lebrun, 2013, p. 6). The practice was first brought to the world's attention by Jenny Nordberg's New York Times article in 2010. In 2014, Nordberg published a follow-up book, which documents the lives and struggles of Afghan women and girls— Azita, Mehran, Zahra, Shukria, Sakina, Shahed and Nader, all of whom have practiced crossdressing to be boys under social or economic pressure (Nordberg, 2014). From a very young age, often at birth, the parents decide that a girl will grow up with short hair, wearing *shalwar kameez* (pants and a long shirt) and playing soccer. When the girl reaches her marriageable age, she has to turn back to her birth gender (Nordberg, 2014). No more shirt and pants; no more running outside or riding bicycles; no more playing with the boys. She will be domesticated, learn how to be a real (feminine) woman, and prepare for marriage and maternity (Manoori & Lebrun, 2013).

Discussing about *bacha posh* is to discuss about gender inequality in present day, postwar Afghanistan. When the Bush administration launched the military invasion Operation Enduring Freedom to Afghanistan in 2001, women liberation was the widely advertised moral rhetoric (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2009). Much like its name, the operation promised to bring back the freedom and dignity for Afghan girls and women oppressed under Taliban rule. Ironically, many of Taliban members were former *Mujahideen* fighter who had been trained in Pakistan with support from the US government during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. The promise of Islamic State based on conservative Syariah law became a powerful recruitment ploy during the resistance, and it eventually became the beginning of Taliban. Subsequently, it was after this period that the perception of gendered inequality and violence were again reinstated as "natural" to "Afghan culture" (Lindisfarne, 2008).

The invasion brought its own spirit of transformation. Through the Bonn Agreement, the international community, in partnership with the Afghan interim and transitional authorities, aims to build peace and security through governance and rule of law and to build an inclusive state, especially for women and girls. Afghanistan became a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2009). In terms of protection for girls, this accession was hoped to support the previously signed international human rights instrument, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was signed in 1994 (Afghanistan UNCRC Civil Society Coalition, 2009). The new government showed a promising progress in 2004 when two different provisions related to the girls' rights, including a provision on gender equality and provision on children's rights to live and development, were included in the new constitution (UNICEF, 2014). However, tangible progress beyond political will has been very

limited. Afghanistan remains in political, military and economic transition and life has stayed pretty much the same for most girls.

Through the lives of the *bacha posh*, this article wishes to unveil what it means to be girls in the post-war Afghanistan where the international community has persistently been trying to teach Afghans about gender and human rights. What does it take to taste the freedom seemingly fated only for boys? Is it humane to have girls disguised as boys? Is the practice just another form of oppression or can it be empowering instead? This is a study about paradoxes: of girls cross-dressing as boys; of acceptance and rejection; of submission and resistance.

### ***Bacha posh*: Hidden Portrait of Girls in Afghanistan**

Currently, international community led by the United States is trying to change the gender norms in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, they are not the first, nor will they be the last. Two former kings, Amanullah Khan (1919–29) and Mohammed Zahir Shah (1933–73) had tried to establish gender equality under the banner of modernization agenda and state communism. Girls were guaranteed education, child marriage, and bride price was banned. Changes happened rapidly, but it was limited to big cities like Kabul (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2009). Now, almost hundreds of development projects to empower girls sponsored by foreign donors happening throughout Afghanistan. They appeared to repeat the similar mistake of the previous occupation. These projects are too ambitious, fragmented, and short term based. They obsessed over teaching girls how to be progressive, assertive, and independent. In the other words, to be more western. From these projects, a handful of “jet-setting strata of English-speaking women activists” have emerged (Nordberg, 2014). However, they do not symbolize progress. They symbolize an even larger gap between urban, high-class girls and rural, middle-class female population. Similar to the past, the issue of women and girls rights has once again become synonymous to an elitist, foreign-backed issue.

For an Afghan girl, discrimination starts right at the beginning of her life. Boys are generally more preferred than girls are. In a country where the rule of law is practically non-existent, the number of sons is regarded as equal to family's strength. Son has the ability to contribute to the family income. He and his future wife are expected to care for his parents during old age. Daughter, on the other hand, is expected to leave after marriage to serve her husband's family (Arnold, 2001). Inheritance and household assets in Afghanistan are passed only through the male lineage because her presence in her birth family is considered temporary (Sato, 2007). Afghanistan is not alone in its population's preference for a son. Anthropological literature has found that parents' preferences for having boys compare to girls are almost universal. Williamson (1976), for example, could only find a handful of societies in the world where fathers prefer daughter more than son: Assam (India), Australia, California (USA), New Guinea, and Peru. Sex-selective abortion is widespread, not only in developing country but also in developed countries such as the Republic of Korea, Singapore, India, and China, facilitated by an increasingly available ultrasound technology that helps parents to know the fetuses sex in advance

(Guilmoto, 2009). In Afghanistan, such technology is considerably expensive and only available in big cities like Kabul. Instead, couples use traditional guidelines on nutrition and intercourse positions, which are believed to help the conception of a male child (Nordberg, 2014).

The pressure to have a son can overrule any concern about the mother's safety. Women who give birth to a girl will keep trying to have a son until she is considered infertile (Nordberg, 2014). Afghanistan Mortality Survey (AMS) for 2010 shows that 41 per cent death among fertile women is caused by health complication related to pregnancy such as hemorrhage, eclampsia and prolonged or obstructed labour. Other than high fertility, poor antenatal care, low rates of skilled attendance at birth, low rates of contraceptive prevalence and maternal malnutrition also contribute to a high number of maternal deaths across the country (Maurie, 2001). The risk of maternal death is even higher for adolescent pregnancy. UNICEF survey in 2010 showed that 14 per cent of girls and women aged 15-19 years had already started childbearing, with 9.7 percent having had a live birth and 4.2 per cent being pregnant with their first child. Another data from the 2010 Afghanistan Mortality Survey revealed that nearly a third of all deaths of girls aged 15-19 years were pregnancy related (UNICEF, 2014).

If a woman gives birth to a baby boy, the mother and her newborn will be welcomed with music, gifts and prayer in a ceremony called *nashrah* (Bezhan & Salih, 2011). She automatically becomes the envy of other women for bringing wealth and luck for the family. On the opposite, having a baby daughter is thoroughly despised. The woman will be welcomed with mockery, often called a *dokhtar zai*, or "she who only brings daughters." The husband will also be mocked as a weakling, often called a *mada posht* or "he whose woman will only deliver girls" (Nordberg, 2014, p. 16). She might be beaten and denied meals for days. She is considered a "humiliation" for creating another burden on the family (Nordberg, 2014, pp. 33-34). Contrasting rewards and punishment create an obsession among women to give birth to a son. This further forms the basis of discrimination of the next generation of girls (Miller, 1984; Pande, 2003).

Nobody knows the exact number of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan as becoming one is not something to be said aloud, although it is not entirely a secret. Because of social pressure and desperation, there are cases in which female infant is announced as son right after birth. The practice of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan can be found across provinces, tribes, and socio-economic class. It is said that the tradition has been found in the country for centuries. King Habibullah Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919, famously asked his youngest daughter to dress as a man to guard his harem (Manoori & Lebrun, 2013). For years in the girl's life, society - neighbors, relatives, even mullah (religious officials) will play along. She would be called by her new masculine name; from Mahnoush to Mehran, Shukria to Shukur, Nadia to Nader (Nordberg, 2014). She would become a son and a brother. At least until puberty come.

For as long as the lie will hold, it is quietly accepted that having a made-up son is better than having none. A superstitious belief also exists that having a *bacha posh* in the family would increase the probability of having a son in the family (Manoori & Lebrun, 2013). Thus, *bacha posh* become the temporary protector of family honour, at least until her brother arrives or until she gets married.

## Boy's Clothes and the Paradox of Freedom

Culture always plays an important part in determining how the body is interpreted (Beauvoir, 2010) and how gender is performed (Butler, 2004). In a conservative society like Afghanistan, sex anatomy is considered a taboo subject to protect the purity of their children's mind, especially girls. In addition, seeing the opposite sex naked before marriage is absolutely forbidden. Thus, clothes differentiate boys and girls. And for *bacha posh*, pants, shirt and tie act as a cloak, hiding the female body while emphasizing her masculine persona (Nordberg, 2014).

Wearing boy's clothes can have many advantages. Generally, an Afghan girl holds very limited rights and is subjected to strict cultural practices regulating female behavior. To protect her honour, she is not allowed to go outside without a company from a male kin, cannot do manual labour, and cannot help to provide for the family (UNICEF, 2014). In rural areas, sending girls to school is still regarded to be against honour and leads to bad reputation. As the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) study summarized, "If a daughter is enrolled in school, the fear of being shamed by extended family members in other households, neighbours and others is widespread" (Hunte, 2006). A set of boy's clothing and new short haircut are all it takes for girls to do activities traditionally privileged for boys. A *bacha posh* can freely go outside without her kin. She studies at school, plays sports, running errands, carrying heavy supplies, and even helps defending her mother and siblings when the father is not around.

Being a *bacha posh* might be empowering, but it is temporary. The girl and her parents know that one day she will have to go back and accept her nature. Transformation to be a full pledge woman usually started just before puberty happens to avoid a situation of being "strange in the head" (Nordberg, 2014, p. 69). The process of readopting womanhood is a constant struggle, as told by a former *bacha posh*, Shukria. She needs to constantly discipline her body and adopt body language of common girls: learn to walk femininely, to bend her head slightly and avoid direct gaze to show submissiveness. She also needs to learn about proper etiquette and domestic chores, such as cooking, sewing, and house cleaning from zero, painstakingly (Nordberg, 2014, pp. 116-119).

More importantly, she needs to forget the freedom she earned by dressing as boys. No more playing and going outside. Her conduct and movement will be restricted. In public, she needs to abide by a "gendered body's placement" to shield her virginity and reputation (Fluri, 2011, p. 286). She cannot be seen near men who are not her kin. She will start wearing a veil and loose clothing with hope to protect her from the gaze of strangers and allowing anonymous movements in public. As suggested by Stallybrass (1986), discipline and control of woman's body are central in the patriarchal establishment. A woman who disobeyed the male standard of a good woman, such as going out alone or unafraid to talk back, is considered a whore and a disgrace. Having freedom and

surrounded by boys will make her “impure,” taint hers and her family’s reputation. In Afghanistan’s culture of honour, the male members of the family, especially the father, are responsible for this policing. The man who allowed a female member of the family, a wife or a daughter, having too much freedom might be called a *begherat*, meaning a coward who cannot protect his women. That is why close male relatives, including father and brother usually commit honored killings (Pumbay, 2016).

During her years in Afghanistan, Nordberg met some who still refused to revert. One of them is Zahra who was 16 years old when Nordberg met her (Nordberg, 2014). Meeting an older *bacha posh* like Zahra was unusual because most parents will encourage them to revert before puberty. Scientifically, puberty is believed to be the most crucial time in human development. Hall (1904) calls this phase “storm and stress,” characterized by simultaneously significant physiological, psychological, and social change (Hall, 1904). Bodily changes, such as menstruation, the growth of genitalia and underarm hair, breast development, and development of broader hips might increase awareness of one’s own birth sex. At the same time, increased cognitive skills enable reflection of own self-identity and representation based on the information and consideration of her surroundings (Côté, 2009). There might be confusion over her bodily transformation against her socially constructed gender.

Nordberg speculated that *bacha posh* who refused to revert might be suffering from Gender Dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is described as an incongruence between one’s initially assigned gender (birth sex) and the gender which she identifies herself with. The most common characteristics of the condition are the feeling of distress and uncomfortable with one’s own body, particularly during puberty, and the desire to be accepted as part of the opposite gender. Resentment is often shown to significant changes happening to her own body (Edgardo, 2012). However, it should be noted that cross-gender statement and expression are scientifically acceptable and may be part of normal development. Studies in America show that less than 20% of children who experienced gender variance behaviour before puberty will continue to experience it post-puberty (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Even less are likely to undergo puberty suppression, transgender hormones, and surgical interventions (Drummond, et al., 2008).

Moreover, taking a direct comparison between the *bacha posh* and Western children who experience gender dysphoria is not appropriate considering they have a completely different situation. First, they do not choose to be boys, but they are assigned to be one. Her identity develops from a mere biological female to becoming a culturally defined boy through social interaction, within the family and outside. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 12). In most societies, as Chodorow (1989) points out, the socialization of girls is oriented toward docility, nurturance, and responsibility as girlhood is usually regarded as preparation for motherhood. However, the *bachas* grow up with completely different psychosocial expectation. Masculine behaviour, including assertiveness and self-reliance, are always encouraged. During her five years of investigation, Nordberg (2014) noticed some common behaviour from the *bachas*. They would try hard displaying an overly masculine aggressive attitude,

compensating their softer feature and feminine giggle. In other words, they are performing their identity as boys. And parents praised them for that: "He is completely like a boy... He is a good son for us" (Nordberg, 2014, p. 65)

Second, they grow up in an environment where being girls means being secondary in every aspect of social life. The culture of oppression against girls can be perceived as "pervasive messages of rejection" against their gender (Garbarino, 2008). Because of their gender, they are not worthy to be educated, to access resources, and to govern their own body. Taking the theory from Rohner (1975), rejection can have severely affect psychological development and distorts children behavior. An important question needs to be pondered: will they show similar symptoms if they were born and raised in a more egalitarian society?

Reverting might fall within the family interest; however, individuals are always left to contemplate about their gender identity alone. Long-term segregation from birth gender might cause confusion over their own identity. And it is the price they need to pay for the brief freedom they experienced.

### **Contesting International Discourse on the Girl Child**

Girls comprise one of the most vulnerable population group in the world; her age denied her agency and her gender denied her legitimacy in society (Taefi, 2009). A report by Plan International (2015) shows that girls are objected to vulnerability in many aspects of her life. It is estimated that a 1% fall in GDP will cause 7.4 deaths per 1000 infant girls, compared to only 1.5 deaths per 1000 infant boys. Women and girls comprise 55% of 20.9 million victims of child labor. One in five adolescent girls are out of school, and those who drop out have three times higher rate of getting married before 18.

The growing recognition of inequality and injustice faced by girls around the world prompted the emergence of a new term in early 1980: the girl child (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009). Ward (1982, p. 91) uses the term to emphasize the victimization of "girl-children" around the world and to "helps us perceive and understand that the ontological experience of being male or female starts at birth". Significant critiques were directed towards United Nations for not recognizing girl child as "independent subjects and rights holders under national and international law" (Gruskin & Plafker, 2000, p. 257). Scholars noted that while synthesis of age and gender has often put protection of the girl child under UNCRC or CEDAW, this intersection has only put the subject as a side project (Taefi, 2009).

Under CEDAW, the rights of girl become synonymous to those of woman. There is only one reference to "girls" exists in the entire Women's Convention which is found in the article on education. This is neglecting the fact that girls face discrimination in multiple aspects of their life (Federle, 1994). Orloff (1996) has noted how, particularly in welfare states, the interests of women and children are often treated as singular especially because women's work is often connected with motherhood. However this grouping has only disfavor the two groups as both have distinct needs and challenges (Gruskin and Plafker 2000).

Because of their age, girls are deemed to have very limited capacity and agency and thus are placed even lower in the social hierarchy (Federle, 1994).

UNCRC, on the other hand, is criticized for neglecting the gender issue. UNCRC is one of few UN instruments to receive such massive international support with ratification by all UN Nations, but Somalia and United States of America. By ratifying the UNCRC, "national governments...committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children's rights and they...agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community" (UNICEF 2010). The document consists of fifty four articles based on the principles of nondiscrimination; best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. However, over time children's rights became synonymous with the rights of the boy child because girl, for her gender, has often denied her own rights (Taefi, 2009).

The term girl child had finally entered public discourse by the late 1980s as UNICEF started to focus on the plight of the girl child. Consequently, 1990 was marked by the declaration of "The Year of the Girl Child" and the 1990s "The Decade of the Girl Child" (Berman, et al., 2002). The Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995 become the first UN conference where the girl child was a key topic area. The conference resulted in Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with nine strategic objectives to eliminate oppressive cultural and institutional establishment and to promote the protection of the rights of the girl child (UN Women, 1995).

However, there is something problematic about how girl child is depicted within the international human rights discourse. Girl child is portrayed as "a particular type of female child... a victimized, traumatized, helpless child who sits at the intersection of various sociopolitical ills." (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009, p. 178). This reductionist portrayal of girl child has the risk of oversimplifying different types of experience of girls living in different societies in the world.

Nordberg first discovered about the cross-dressing practice of *bacha posh* in 2011 and she was appalled because none of the experts working for United Nations or other independent aid organizations were aware of their existence. While girl and woman issues are among the main priorities of international aid community, they seemed to be more interested in teaching Afghans about Western discourse of gender. Countless "gender workshops" happen in Kabul and many "gender experts" reside in the country, yet they have been ignoring the lives of many girls who do not have any choice but to dress as boys. The practice was simply dismissed as an individual "anomaly" (emphasis in original) (Nordberg, 2014, p. 19). *Bacha posh* is another challenge for human rights and gender advocates in the country, and globally, to constantly explore the variety of issues affecting girls across different societies. And, more importantly, to find ways to approach the issues without ignoring girls' resilience and agency in dealing with their situation.

As female children, *Bacha posh* do not look like girls and they do not act as girls. In Afghan's poor households, *bacha posh* is actively taking part as the breadwinner for the survival of the whole family. They can be found working as shop assistants or out on the street selling chewing gum, polishing shoes, or offering to wash car window (Nordberg, 2014). While no one knows the exact



number due to the discreet nature of their existence, they comprise Afghanistan's child worker force together with other "real" boys. The minimum age for employment under Afghanistan's Labour Law is 18 years old (Government of Afghanistan, 1999). However, the 2010-2011 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey by the government found that 25 percent of Afghan children between the ages of 5 and 14 are involved in child work (Government of Afghanistan, 2013). Another survey by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) on 2013 found the number is higher at 52 percent (AIHRC, 2013). The International community has voiced concern over children working long hours and under hazardous condition. Finally, in 2014, the government created a list of 19 harmful jobs for children which include carpet weaving, mining, welding, working at metal factories, and making brick at the kilns. The regulation also prohibits children employment between 7 PM and 6 AM and prohibition on bonded child labour. Unfortunately, the list is not supported with any form of enforcement and children employments in those sectors are widespread (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

On a more positive note, not all jobs available for children are harmful. Echoing Hobbs and McKechnie (1997) when the work is age appropriate and take place in a healthy and safe condition, employment might benefit children's development. A former *bacha posh*, who is now working in politics, Azita, recalled her experience working in a store as a positive one. Disguising as a boy, Azita enjoyed her freedom without worrying over the usual scrutiny given to girls' body and behavior. She also learned about self-confidence and resilience, a skill set that helped her greatly in advancing to be a woman parliament member in the patriarch Afghanistan (Nordberg, 2014). Having experience of working and being allowed into new settings constitute masculine experience for the bachas and it is beneficial for their development process. Werner and Smith (1982) finds that girls who are able to combine feminine traits (including nurturance, emotional sensitivity, and social perceptiveness) and masculine characteristics (such as activeness and independence) are at an advantage compared to the 'traditional' girls who only have feminine traits. By being allowed to experience new settings and behavioral sets, they become more flexible and more likely to access social resources to face challenges.

Incorporating the experience of the *bacha posh* is crucially needed in order to create a comprehensive strategy to fight discrimination against young girls in Afghanistan. To build a shared and lasting approach and a wide movement of advocacy and awareness that reach different experiences of being girls. Their brief life as a *bacha posh* should become a crucial component in forming their self-identity as an empowered woman. It will prepare them to participate actively in decisions and activities in which they become the center of the movement. As one former *bacha posh* describes her feeling on the whole experience: "I am happy God made me a girl... It's only important to be a *bacha posh* in the head, to know you can do anything" (Nordberg, 2014, p. 94).

## Conclusion

*Bacha posh* serve as a portrayal of Afghan girls and Afghan families who cleverly resisting the rigid societal norms in the midst of constant wars and destruction. Their resistance is subtle, yet resourceful. In the midst of pessimism among development professional on the future of girls' rights in the country, their story can serve as a hope. That the system is not impossible to bend. As documented by Nordberg (2014), the women who spent their younger days as *bacha posh* usually grew up to be confident and more assertive individuals. They become excellent wives and mothers who want their daughters to get an even better chance in life. They will be the perfect alliance in this fight against oppressive patriarchy. After all, they know how freedom feels like and they know how creatively buck the system. Finding them might be difficult due to the clandestine nature of the practice, but it is not impossible when one is willing to listen and observe what is actually happening on the bustling streets of Afghanistan.

*Bacha posh* is a missing component in the narrative of resistance for women and girls' rights in Afghanistan. There is a popular Afghan saying that "women are made for homes or graves"; *bacha posh* has proven the opposite. Society, not only in Afghanistan, often tells us that a girl and a boy are born with different strength and ability. A boy grows up to be a protector; girl grows up to be a nurturer. A girl is considered weaker than boy, and she needs protection. This narrative often plays out within the patriarchal society, in order to justify the subordination of women and girls. Unfortunately, the current discourse of girl child protection also reflects this exact same sentiment. The girl child is imagined as pitiful and passive victims of gendered and societal discrimination. *Bacha posh* fall outside this political imagination. They are feisty and self-reliant. They are clever students, they can be good at sports, they are strong enough to carry a heavy sack of food and supplies, and they are resilient enough to work and support the families. Countless of possibilities are open for these girls when the curtain of gender is lifted. That is when they are given the chance to act beyond their normative birth gender.

It is impossible to uphold the rights of girls in the absence of security, rule of law, and general welfare. Afghan life and culture very much revolve around families and clans. In order to deal with insecurity and instability created by constant wars and conflicts, Afghan fathers use marriage to create alliances or strengthen pre-existing one. Poverty also becomes a huge obstacle to promoting girls' rights. Girls are required to drop out from school and get married to ease family's economic burden. As job is scarce and poverty is widespread, bride price is still considered a lucrative source of income for the family. Therefore, to promote the rights for girls, the Afghan government, with support from international donors, needs to promote the life of Afghan families.

Girls and women, even in Western societies, have been cross-dressing for centuries. Joan of Arc, for example, dress as a male soldier in order to serve for her country before finally being captured by the English at the age of 19. There was also Bill Tipton, a respectful jazz musician who cross-dress until her death in 1989. They were united by the same reason: escaping society's condemnation to

pursue goals deemed unfit for girls and women. It can be argued that along with an improving living standard in Western societies, girls and women have an increasingly equal status compare to their men counterparts. Hopefully, this is also the future for girls in Afghanistan. One day, girls like Mehran and Zahra do not need to change their name or their appearance to go to school, to play outside, or to walk freely on the street of Afghanistan. That day will come only when peace, security, and welfare prevail in the country.

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