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**POSH BAZI, GIRLS WHO BECOME BOYS. SOCIO-CULTURAL  
PROCESSES OF GENDER IDENTITY CONVERSION AND  
MASCULINISATION**

**ABSTRACT.** In Afghan culture, one of a married couple's roles is to bear male offspring. This is a cultural and social obligation in which failure to bear a son can represent a dangerous loss of social and family honour. To preserve their respectable social image, parents sometimes begin a sexual identity conversion process of a daughter that leads to a deconstructing of her female gender identity, transforming her into a male. This tradition leads to the abandonment of a girls' female nature and leads the new "son" to experience civil and social rights that she would never have known had she continued to live as a female. This elevation of social status leads the new son to behave and have life experiences and social obligations that are very difficult to give up in adulthood. This social interpretation is limited in time because Pashtun culture requires the son to return to being a female and fulfil her cultural obligations of marriage, giving up the male freedoms and expressions that she had known and experienced as an adolescent.

**Keywords**

Culture, violence, gender deconstructing, woman, rights

According to a recent study conducted by UNICEF<sup>1</sup>, the children's lives in Afghanistan are strongly deprived and often dramatic because most of them from poor social classes live in a permanent condition of economic uncertainty that jeopardises the requirements and conditions for stable and effective social and economic growth.

Orphans<sup>2</sup> risk being victims of illegal markets with organ smuggling and prostitution (Katsui, 2008). Their tragically scarred destiny defines and impacts their most elementary civil rights and personal freedoms (Mondloch, 2013) that are universally considered inalienable and untouchable in the world of childhood: the opportunity to sing, play, listen to music, dance, joke with friends, run and especially, receive an education<sup>3</sup>. This sociocultural ban is handed down through traditions as a shared and socially accepted cultural cognitive heritage in which the cultural norm

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<sup>1</sup> Christophe Boulierac, spokesman for UNICEF in Geneva, reports alarming nutritional conditions of children in Afghanistan. Two million children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition, with 600,000 affected by severe acute malnutrition, the most dangerous form of malnutrition for a child that reduces their resistance to disease. In Afghanistan, only one out of two children is vaccinated," states Boulierac, adding: "the consequences include physical and cognitive damage for life."

<https://www.unicef.it/doc/9088/afghanistan-2-milioni-di-bambini-soffrono-di-malnutrizione-acuta.htm>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.affaritaliani.it/gallery/cronache/afghanistan-bambini-sfollati-orfani-a-causa-dei-conflitti-nel-paese-396310.html>;

<sup>3</sup> Today, only around 60% of Afghan children attend school and only 28% of the adult population is literate. In addition, the education system lacks infrastructure.  
<https://www.humanium.org/en/afghanistan/>

shapes and imposes itself on laws<sup>4</sup> and brutally represses and checks every form of liberal expression; an abdication of individual rights and freedoms<sup>5</sup> enshrined by a dominant masculinist culture<sup>6</sup> that holds hostage the female gender whose innate and immutable inferiority dictated by sexual identity leads to denial of any possibility of freedom, emancipation or education<sup>7</sup>.

Women in Afghanistan are deprived of all rights and are the property of their husbands who can do anything they please with their wives (Rostami-Povey, 2007). This condition is particularly widespread in rural areas and is strongly influenced by a patriarchal cultural system wherein masculine power controls and subjugates women not only in familial contexts, but also and especially in public ones. In the richest regions and large cities, women are beginning to see a gradual process of professional emancipation, being permitted to offer services in contexts outside the family, such as in offices or other public services. However, this slow socio-cultural transformation has not imposed itself in more rural contexts where women are deprived of education and primary schooling, excluded from social and political life, and are constrained by

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<sup>4</sup> Only 6% of births are officially recorded in Afghanistan. As a result, most Afghan children have no official identity or nationality. They are invisible in the eyes of society. <https://www.humanium.org/en/afghanistan>

<sup>5</sup> At least one-quarter of Afghan children between ages 5 and 14 work for a living or help their families with little or no pay. Many are employed in jobs that can lead to illness, injury or even death due to hazardous working conditions and poor enforcement of health and safety standards.

<sup>6</sup> In Afghanistan, the role of the 'weaker sex' is still subordinate to the dictates of a highly chauvinistic and conservative society.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan considers women to be sub-human. <http://www.rawa.org/wom-view.htm>

undisputed male power. Instead, they are limited to contributing to raising children, maintaining their offspring and domestic life in the home as the sole environment in which they are permitted to act and move with the greatest freedom, except when their husband's presence subjects them once more to a rigid framework of absolute subordination and total acquiescence. Social isolation tends to be accentuated when the woman has no sons or if there are few male family members. The absence of these "guardians" greatly limits a woman's external contacts and social relations in the community. It is also for this reason that one of the duties of women in Afghanistan is to have sons<sup>8</sup>, in order to guarantee descendants for her husband's family line. Therefore, conceiving and raising a son is an important task representing full satisfaction of a social order that considers the son to be the continuation of that hereditary bond that is culturally conceived as a form of power and dignity inherent to the male gender and that is passed down from father to son (MoLSAMD, and UNICEF, 2018). Giving the family a male member grants the female greater external movement since she can be monitored and so she is freer to communicate outside the home. Giving birth to a son also means fulfilling her biological role as a woman and her honourable and necessary socio-cultural duty as a person intended to bear offspring. On the other hand, failure to bear sons tends to weaken the parents' social role, with it being a shortcoming that could jeopardise their very function and social

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<sup>8</sup> Woman in Afghanistan fits only for household slavery and as a means of procreation.

utility<sup>9</sup>. A woman unable to bear sons is called *dokhatr zai* or “she who is able to bear only daughters”, while a man without male children is known as *mada posht* i.e. “he whose woman bears only girls”.

In Afghan family culture, the presence of only daughters can represent a dangerous loss of social honour with tragic consequences for all family members; a husband incapable of producing a son is considered incomplete, harming the family's offspring and descendants. The woman is blamed and suffers indelible disgrace, since she is considered "defective, incapable, not determined" (Corboz et al., 2019) (culturally, it is believed that males are not born because the woman did not deeply desire a son<sup>10</sup>). The absence of male children represents a danger that can compromise the image and social status of the parents and the entire family in the eyes of their community. Afghan culture circumvents this risk of stigma by converting the identity of one of the daughters, transforming her into a new subject and assigning her a new gender identity: that of a boy. This widespread sociocultural gender change phenomenon that is little known outside the country is called *Bacha Posht* which means “dressed as a boy, raised and educated as a boy”. This gender identity reversal process occurs before puberty, and is well known to the entire community, which consents to and acknowledges the girl's change of role. The

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/manly-honor-and-gendered-male-afghanistan>

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, 2014. *Children and Women in Afghanistan: A Situation Analysis 2014*. [Online] Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/SitAn\\_-\\_Long\\_Report-\\_small\\_size\\_.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/SitAn_-_Long_Report-_small_size_.pdf) [Accessed 20 March 2017].

widespread conviction is that it is much better to have half a male son in the family than none.

However, the masculinisation processes of females also occur in more urban areas and more openly in family groups in which a woman had also been raised as Posh. In some cases, the choice to change gender is permitted regardless of the number of males or the need to protect family honour and avoid social stigma. This act of freedom is often granted or directed toward the daughter whose characteristics and physical nature best reflect male gestures, nature and attitudes.

This is a collegial decision that involves every member of the family, with even the mother participating in the decision to have one of her daughters become a boy. The girl is not permitted to oppose or escape the parental imposition, so she becomes a boy in every respect; her physical appearance has to change and resemble that of a boy as much as possible, even including a body and visual plasmatation process with a consequent deep destructuring of her gender identity. This decision presupposes a path that is refined and structured throughout childhood and adolescence. The reconfiguration of a female to a male saves the family from the shame of being unable to conceive a male heir. Therefore, the girl is selected and undergoes a new identity formation, a new gender identity, social conversion to restore family honour that was harmed and potentially compromised by the absence of a male child.

So, the little girl dresses like a boy, behaves like a boy and enjoys the rights and freedoms granted only to the men of her culture. She is permitted to play, go to

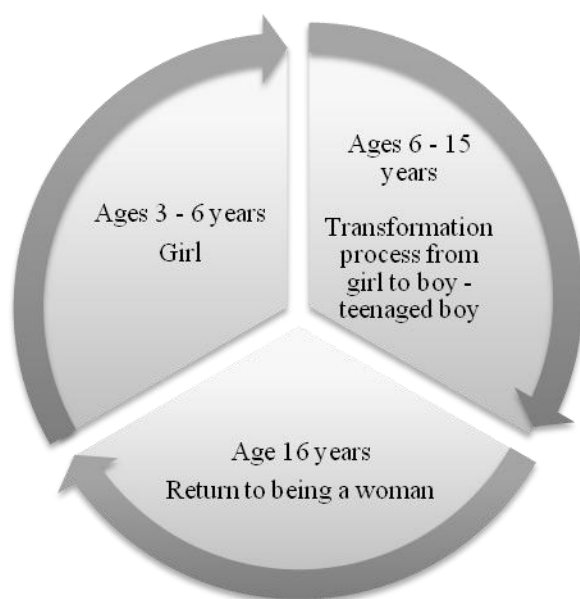
school and go outdoors. Through this opening to the outside world and knowledge of rights that she would never have known as a female, a male identity is imposed on her. Her behaviour, ambiguity and the obligation to perform heavy work reserved to males, project her into a social status above her sisters and her own mother. During her adolescence, she experiences those rights and freedoms, including the possibility to practice a sport, go to school, laugh, go outdoors and play football. As a man, the Posh can accompany her mother and sisters, externally fulfilling her role as escort and monitoring of women. During her period of masculinity, the Bacha Posh's sexuality may be adapted by the male social role that she interprets to the point that she may even have private sexual relationships with other women.

This identity destructuring cultural process creates a new person who is socially perceived and lives as a man, even receiving a new name. She sacrifices and abandons her sexual and social connotation for the need to create a new self, a new person who is perceived as a man and is therefore protected and supported by the entire community to protect the family's honour.

This cultural practice is shared and accepted as necessary to protect family honour, granting respectability and acceptance (Sawitri, 2017). There is a secret protected by the parents and family members, including relatives, who know the child's true identity but tacitly maintain silence. However, the public interpretation of a male by the girl-boy is destined to end when local culture requires women to wed and accept their inescapable duty to bear sons.

After living as a male, the girl is required to return to being a female, and therefore lose the rights and freedoms that she had known and enjoyed as a male.

This is a mandatory stage which the woman cannot escape.



Returning to the female dimension and social status implies reacquiring those movements that had been forgotten and hidden for years and, most of all, leaving behind the freedom (laughing, playing, joking, running) she had known as a teenaged boy, becoming a quiet and obedient wife for the rest of her life.

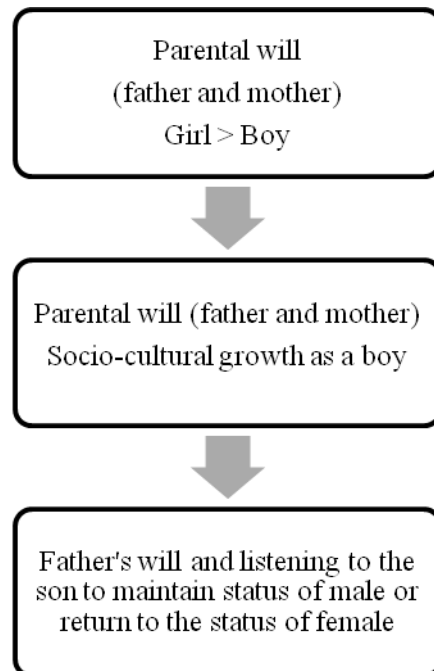
For many, the transition to womanhood means pain and suffering, because it means returning to the prisons of exclusion and the inability to exercise the most elementary civil rights. The young woman is familiar with this inverse cyclical dynamic, having witnessed her mother's and sisters' experiences. It represents a



return to oblivion, paralysis and a prison to which the woman is often contrary and hostile, having previously experienced rights and freedoms. However, this return is not always automatic because, culturally, her fate may reserve an unexpected outcome since she could be amnestied and permitted to continue living as a man with her father's consent.

If granted, the woman continues her life as a man, continuing to enjoy the rights granted to her status as a man, although she is forbidden to marry or have children. This concession may be granted to allow her to care for her mother in her old age, for example. This choice could allow her to continue to lead a life that is free but limited, and without marriage or children. Many women-men agree to this option, since (often arranged and forced) marriage would imply returning to total dependence on, and subjection to, her husband, depriving her of any form of expression and freedom with a predictable life sentence in the social domestic role structured around total allegiance to a male. It is worth noting that the girl-boy's wishes are a decisive factor in any identity conversion, because the father, who legitimises and orders, allows his son-daughter to maintain the social status and gender based on her decision and direct will. He may listen to her because she is culturally and socially male and not female. The change is focal because at no point in the girl's growth can she interact, propose or express her own opinion unless she lives as a boy. Only in this situation is *he* authorised to do so, having a strong influence on *his* father since the socio-cultural

status he enjoys is equal to that of a man and therefore legitimised and he is permitted to express his own thoughts<sup>11</sup>.



Recent studies conducted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Ministry of Public Health, Afghanistan and the Ethics Committee of the South African Medical Research Council (Corboz et al, 2019), carried out on a sample of Afghan

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<sup>11</sup> This gender condition has social and legal consequences in the family and the community itself. To be a man means enjoying rights and privileges that are perceived as civil and human rights in western culture.

women have led to interesting results which show that the socio-economic structure of families is high if a Posh is present within the family itself.

This condition can be justified by the fact that Posh Bazi can work, unlike the other female figures who are forbidden to work activities and the possibility that they are culturally authorized to accompany women to work, thus increasing the number of subjects within the family with economic inputs. The historical presence of Posh within a family group would tend to favor the conversion of women into men in support of a tradition that from both perspectives of the subjects, male and female involved, is seen positively; on the one hand, the recovery of honor and greater economic revenue, on the other, the female one, greater freedom and social inclusion.

Although the socio-economic composition of the households surveyed was quite similar, the sample of women interviewed was quite varied: many had numerous sons and daughters and the intra-family contexts were polygamous in many cases. However, subjection of women to patriarchal power is accepted and considered right by a large percentage of women who approve of segmentation, limits and violence.

Scholars have analysed this data to classify households according to various criteria: socio-demographic, education, characteristics of the household (number of sons and daughters and if the woman is the only wife or there are other wives cohabiting within the same family).

Afghanistan is a country in which different ethnicities cohabit, and the Pashtun culture seems to be that in which the tradition survives. The presence of Posh within

a household reflects a precedent within the family; a tradition that is repeated cyclically within family groups in which the masculinisation process is already known. What emerges is that there is more likely to be a Posh Bazi in families having a greater number of daughters. This leads to reasoning on the need to convert a female child into a male that is based not only on ethno-cultural considerations but economic as well. Having few sons can lead to an extended and continuing state of poverty since it is the man's responsibility to work and maintain the family. Having no sons may weaken the family economically.

Another factor that can lead to a broader dissemination of the phenomenon is the presence of Posh Bazi in households having more than one wife. Culturally, women are required to be accompanied by a male family member in public, and intrafamily contexts with several wives and few sons greatly limit the possibility of women to go out in public. Therefore, the presence of Posh Bazi in polygamous contexts would allow women to go out in public since the Posh performs the role of *mahrums* (escort-controller), a role assigned exclusively to males. So, because they can be accompanied in public with Posh Bazi, the woman is permitted to go out, even hold a job. In this sense, the data show that the Posh Bazi allows the woman to be employed, increasing family income. The possibility for a woman to hold a job leads the woman herself to support the decision to have a Posh Bazi in the family, since it grants her and her daughters greater freedom.

It is clear that this new condition (whether temporary or permanent) imposes a social comparison and constitutes an escape, liberating the Posh from the conditions of social inferiority to which women are subjected. The comparison shows how tradition stresses that simply enjoying the status of man can grant the subject a moderately free and autonomous life (Khodai, 2012). However, this widespread phenomenon that is little known outside Afghan society (with little literature on this subject) centralises power in the male as the dominant, authoritarian and essential figure within any household. The presence of men in the household attests to the diffusion of a chauvinistic cultural concept, with males managing, organising and making all decisions in everyday life. Thus, the absence of a son compromises an internal and external equilibrium because it deprives the family of figures able to manage and maintain the family. The role of the woman is relegated to that of only doing housework and raising offspring, with a few limited exceptions of public outings and external work. She is forbidden to establish friendships or to work except to manage the home in rural contexts. Therefore, the male is considered culturally not only superior as being able to take decisions but is the only figure accepted by society to conduct any professional activity suitable to maintain the family and monitor the woman. A family in Afghanistan cannot survive solely with the contribution of the woman because she is forbidden to work. Therefore, the absence of a son compromises the socio-economic status of the family since he alone is permitted to work.

The conversion of the girl to a boy is not merely a matter of dignity and fulfilment of the parental role but becomes an element supporting the entire family. Having a male in the family means greater economic income and maintenance of the entire household and of future progeny. Not only that, but the presence of a male allows the woman to go out in public and conduct professional activities, thereby collaterally increasing total family income.

The male occupies a central role around which the family and society are structured and are supported, with roles, responsibilities and power attributed to him by the culture, able to manage them because culturally normed by a value system that considers gender identity an edifying element in Afghan society; a socio-cultural structure that condemns females to a life of mere procreation and assistance to the male, who is permitted any form of violence and deprivation against the female.

## **Conclusion**

In Afghan cultures, women are socially isolated, alienated and barred from professional activities. Emancipation from these restrictions hinges on the presence of a male in the family since only men have the right to build relational, social and professional processes. The social, legal and cultural legitimacy of male supremacy and patriarchal control are renewed cyclically over the years, because the woman's physical and cultural transformation into a man offers social and professional

emancipation and breaks down the restrictive barriers of social exclusion. This is an alternative and an opportunity that Afghan women are loathe to relinquish.

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