

AFGHAN GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Before beginning the reading on Afghan gender relationships, please see a list of pertinent terms and resources that add understanding to this topic's discussion. A number of reference resources are imbedded in the text:

Pertinent Terms:

Ayb - Shameful

Bacha Bazi – Dancing or Fancy boys

Bacha Posh – Boys that are really girls (up to age of puberty)

Fitna – The uncontrolled state as a result of temptation

Gender Identity – Firm belief in one's own gender

Hadiths – Sayings of the Prophet

Haram – Forbidden

Mur'am - Family

Mut'a – Islamic temporary marriage or pleasure marriage

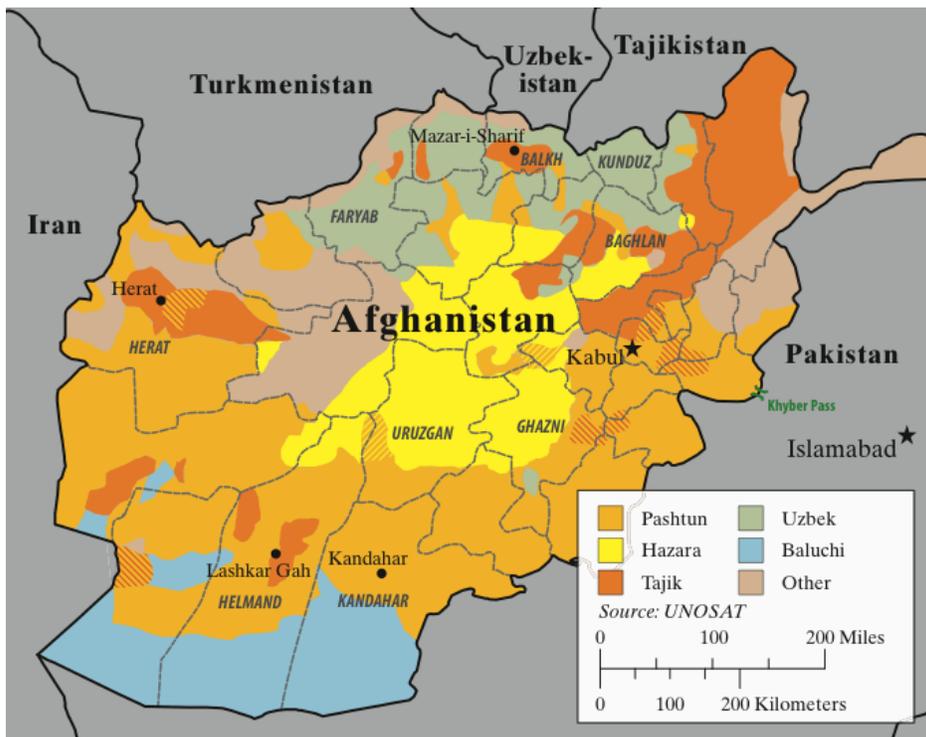
Pashtun – A tribal group within Afghanistan and Pakistan

Pederasty – Sexual relations with boys

Shar'ia – Islamic law.

Zinn'a – Unlawful sexual relations (with eyes, hands, or body parts)

Tribal Map of Afghanistan <http://www.nybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Afghanistan-ethnolinguistic-groups.png>



Please view the following videos:

Dancing Boys of Afghanistan

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=OpTJ8rhb8p0)

Living as a Boy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuzVWoposxc>

Background

The Human Terrain team tasked by the military to research and report on cultural norms within Afghanistan published a controversial paper that has been under discussion ever since. The title of the publication was Pashtun Sexuality <https://info.publicintelligence.net/HTT-PashtunSexuality.pdf> (*If any link does not open, please copy and paste the URL in your internet browser*). This report focused on the Pashtun tribal culture, which extends around the perimeter of Afghanistan from northeast to south and continues west back up to northwest (*see tribal map*). To our western mind it was a shocking report exposing the practice of *Bacha Bazi*, or the substitution of boys for women for erotic enjoyment and sexual practice. The *Bacha Bazi* boys are a symbol of status to their *master* and are required to assume the female role in dress and behavior. They perform in parties where they dance for the enjoyment of the men present, and are required to perform other duties as their master sees fit. In the video *The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan*, many live in dread of puberty, or when they can no longer look or sound like a girl. In tandem with the cross gender role of *Bacha Bazi*, the research also described the extreme marginalization of females where husbands and male relatives sequester females to their homes, and in which their freedom is totally controlled within the society. Though this research was specific to the Pashtun group, the practice of boys satisfying sexual desire and the extreme oppression of women is not specific to Afghanistan and is found historically through many locations in the Islamic world. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/25/middle-east-child-abuse-pederasty>.

Another source, The New Internationalist described pederasty as “a historic part of Arab and Islamic culture”; however, the Koran is very explicit about free sex and what is considered homosexual sex, both of which are highly condemned and are punishable by death <https://newint.org/features/2014/03/01/middle-east-personal-politics/>. Concurrently, radical Islamic interpretations of not only these acts but any expression of sexual expression between a man and a woman other than for procreation within marriage is forbidden including lust for a wife or husband. As stated by Shereen El Feki in a conversation with Graeme Green; “ They wrap sex up in religion and use it as a tool of control. This creates a whole climate where everything is *haram* (forbidden) or *ayb* (shameful).”

Though far from an Islamic scholar, the research I found addressing The Koran and the Hadith requirements extols the sanctity and beauty of marital sex between a husband and wife, and did not attach any shame or forbidden desire unlike, ironically, much western theology. In fact, it is obligatory for both partners to seek sexual satisfaction with each other in fulfillment of marital responsibilities and to avoid any repression of desire. Monasticism and celibacy are strongly opposed. Islam goes very far in it’s description of a husband’s duty to satisfy his wife, and she to him, so there seems to be a conundrum between several factors: non-oppression of sexual desire, obligations for sexual satisfaction, and the repressed heterosexual expression based in radical Islamic interpretation.

It is doubtful that these acts are based in a homosexual nature or identity since true homosexual nature is a natural sexual state and where the practices described above are most assuredly unnatural, but rather a replacement for that which cannot be exposed...or a woman in Islamic society. A woman’s place is in the home and hidden from view of other men, which may look upon her with lust, and therefore, *zinn’a*. She must remain covered and concealed in order to avoid lustful stares. Under the Taliban, women found alone on the street could be shot since presence alone insinuated a woman rejected by her family from either infidelity or

prostitution, both of which are punishable by death. Unfortunately, widowed women whose family refused or were unable to care for them, women spurned by their husbands with no other family ties, as well as female orphans often had to pay the price for these beliefs. Men, culturally, spent most of their days out of the home either working, at prayer in the mosque, or with other men socializing, so time with the woman of the house is limited and relegated to night hours. The woman of the house spends her day working, caring for children, subject to dictatorial elder females, as is the custom, or simply alone.

Interestingly, although men are encouraged to marry young, marriage is an expensive proposition within Islamic and especially Afghan society. Often it is very difficult for them to gather the necessary funds to provide a home for their brides requiring years to accumulate enough resources. For these cases, if he can no longer abstain, nor can afford the cost of a household, Islamic culture goes so far as to allow *mut'a*, which is a temporary marriage (although the woman provides a dowry, men are obligated to pay for the home, furnishing, and expenses). It is interesting to note that a Moslem woman is required to marry only a Moslem man, and can marry temporarily and pursue a second marriage afterwards, but a Moslem man, though obligated to marry a Moslem, can marry outside of the faith except for eastern religions, and especially so for *mut'a* where he can even marry a Jewish woman temporarily. Nevertheless, with all these allowances in Islamic practice in conjunction with strict interpretation of Islamic law that prohibit the practices described between men; these practices still persist. There are several rationalities. One is the belief, which can be misinterpreted from the Koran, that women have a weakness of uncontrollable emotions that can rile up a man into uncontrollable acts, and that she may have an inherent sexual power that can overwhelm a man. "Women represent an abandonment and therefore must be controlled or the result is *fitna* or uncontrolled", <http://www.wluml.org/node/254>. A man may also become so obsessed with desire for a woman that his mind would focus on her rather than God and his fulfillment of religious obligation. The threat of disregarding religious focus through an uncontrollable influence is probably the

strongest for the argument of the marginalization of females. Therefore, keeping women not only out of the public, but also at an emotional distance from men can be conducive to substituting another for the focus of desire. In addition and anecdotally, some Islamic men rationalize that these forbidden behaviors are only between adults; therefore, boys are not adults and exempt from the prohibition. Another rationalization is that women are unclean due to their monthly menses compared to boys, which do not suffer such afflictions.

In a totally different light, the practice of substituting girls for boys or *Bacha Posh* is yet another gender transference within Afghanistan. One of the main reasons for this practice is the shame of producing only girls rather than a son to uphold not only a father's name, but also his masculine pride. The girls in this transferred gender role practice are not sexually abused, but rather assume dress and characteristics of a boy, and are referred to by a male name, and live entirely without any reference to their original female gender until secondary sexual characteristics become obvious. *Bacha Posh* allows the daughter the freedom of behavior permitted to boys outside of the home. After puberty, they are expected to transform back to female and marry. Interestingly, the *Bacha Posh* are a benefit to the mother or older females within the household simply by the fact that a daughter can move freely within the society; a benefit they are denied.

The amorphous gender roles mentioned above occur throughout the Islamic world, but why in Afghanistan is it so pervasive? Why is there a greater need for this practice there than in any other repressed Islamic group? The theories mentioned above can give some more weight than others; however, it still remains a dilemma. It is important to note that the normal behavior of men in Afghanistan toward other men is decidedly uncomfortable for the Western man. The practices of *Bacha Bazi* is an extreme off-shoot of the practice of open affection between men in public such as kissing or holding of hands, which is displayed frequently in Afghan culture. In fact, before going to Afghanistan any male US Advisor requires training for desensitization from affectionate approaches from other men, since a rebuff would

be considered an insult. Die Spiegel quotes the leading Arab journalist Gundi: “Oppression breeds perversion in people”
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/love-lust-and-passion-sex-and-taboos-in-the-islamic-world-a-443678.html> . Is he referring to only a sexual repression, or are there other dynamics such as economic or political repression? These are questions to ponder for our discussion.

International Humanitarian Laws; i.e., UN Resolutions 1325, 1882, 1612.

<https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/womenpeaceandsecurity.pdf>

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/BasicWPSDocs/annotated_1325.pdf

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolution_1882

Books

Kabul in Winter by Ann Jones

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson

A Thousand Splendid Suns and The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

The Book Seller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad

The Pearl that Broke its Shell by Nadia Hashimi