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## In education we trust: combating human insecurity of *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan

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**Abstract.** Tradition is the identity of a society which is preserved to keep the values; it is all about the good and right things and practices within the community. Nevertheless, a tradition known as “*bacha bazi*” in Afghanistan became a threat to human security. That turned out to be an unbreakable cycle of sexual exploitation in society. To combat the human insecurity occurred because of *bacha bazi*, the Afghan government along with international organizations have made the efforts of securitization that did not succeed. Solving its failure, Afghan government revised the entire chapter of criminal code to *bacha bazi*. However, considering *bacha bazi* as a communal practice that has been constructed for hundreds of years within the society of Afghanistan, this paper argues that law enforcement would still make a roof for the violation of justice. This paper suggests that instead of applying law enforcement, the education development within the society should be considered as the first path on the list to combat the human insecurity caused by *bacha bazi* from within. Accordingly, the education development could shorten the road towards securitization. So, which one should come first to combat the human insecurity of *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan?

### 1. Introduction

Alice Horner defined tradition as the cultural aspect that is preserved and passed on from a generation to another. Tradition is also known as a concept which defines a community's identity and uniqueness that also becomes the source of a sense of safety [1]. Tradition is praised and is all about the good things. However, there is a tradition called *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan that becomes everything but good. This particular tradition is known as a threat to human security.

Afghanistan did not have the firm grasp of its freedom until 2012. This country has as significant population of Muslim. Afghanistan had its population controlled by Taliban for long enough to make sharia law or law based on the Muslim holy book, The Qur'an, to be the basic law of their day to day life. From its government to its society, the sharia law is applied.

*Bacha bazi* is a tradition that has been passed on for around 300 years within Persians [2]. The name of *bacha bazi* is translated as the dancing boys. This tradition is not only about boys dancing, but it is also about the sexual exploitation of boys. The cycle of *bacha bazi* starts with the recruitment of the boys. The *bacha baz*, the name of those men who own a *bacha* or simply enjoying the tradition, would start looking for a boy between the ages of 11 to 12 around poor villages of Afghanistan. *Bacha baz* would kidnap those boys or exchange them with a certain amount of money to the family, for the family needs the money to go on with their lives. After the abduction, they would take those boys to a course place where they would take dancing, singing and music classes for the whole year. After a year those boys are ready to dance, sing, and do everything that *bacha baz* expects them to do.



*Bacha*, the boys who dance, are there to be kept by the *bacha baz* up until they turn 20 when they are no longer sexually appealing [3]. This means the *bacha baz* do not think that the boys who are in their 20's are good enough to be *bacha*. During the time they are kept by *bacha baz*, they would dance for men at a private party that is set to enjoy their dancing, and that is where the transaction begins. After the party, men would bid to take the *bacha* home. In some cases, all of the men would spend some time with the *bacha* or the *bacha* will be kept by one *bacha baz* and won't spend a night with other *bacha baz*. Either way, the *bacha* would have to perform the sexual activities with *bacha baz* right after the private party.

The tale of the dancing boys started to be exposed by international media in 2012. In the same year, a U.S army was shot dead by a sniper hired by a *bacha baz* who was confronted for having a *bacha* chained to the bed in his barrack [4]. Nevertheless, the United Nations (UN) had been watching the recruitment of *bacha* long before the tragedy of 2012. United Nations and Afghan government wrote an agreement to stop the practice of *bacha bazi* [5]. Furthermore, the UN has done the speech act as the first step of securitization back in the same year by stating "to take immediate and specific measures to put an end to and prevent the perpetration of.... *bacha bazi*"[6]. Although the speech act done by the UN did not bring much change in Afghanistan, the UN kept on pressing Afghan government to put the practice of *bacha bazi* down. The effort was shown on SIGAR 2017 in which the UN stated that there was the involvement of Afghan officials in the practice of *bacha bazi* and that it needs to stop.

Speech act had also been done by AIHRC or Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). This NGO decided to speak out about *bacha bazi* as a threat towards human security and propose the government to establish a law to put *bacha bazi* down [7]. Although the UN and AIHRC had done the speech, resulted in Afghan government doing the same thing in 2015, *bacha bazi* is still a common practice in the society. The tradition that was seen and a threat towards human security became an issue of national security. The transition happened around 2015 when Afghans started to speak up about how Taliban did terrible things during the regime to the people. After they were set free from Taliban, they realized that those people put into power are doing things worse than Taliban [4].

The securitization process of *bacha bazi* has not stopped since then. The government and other actors such as the UN and AIHRC are still trying to put the tradition to end. The latest move done by the Afghan government is revising the entire chapter of the criminal code to *bacha bazi* in 2017[8]. However, the practice of the tradition does not seem to be close to the end. The question is, how can *bacha bazi* grow and spread within the society of Afghanistan? Can law enforcement stop the practice? And is it wise to put the law enforcement as the first thing on the list than to build a strong foundation of education to raise the awareness within the society?

Education becomes crucial in order to make the securitization of *bacha bazi* runs the way it should be. The law that has been established to put the practice down requires Afghan people to participate in the law enforcement process. Education will make it possible to make the society understand the law better and the role they can take to prevent the violation of human rights.

## 2. Methods

In this research, the authors engage the literature study method which lets the writer use the secondary data. The literature study method is a research method that allows the writers to get most of the data from all relevant and pertinent sources such as books, journals, articles, news, etc. the writers do not have an obligation to conduct their own in field research but rather to use all data available to write their research about specific issue [9]. As for the analysis technique, the writers used the interactive model of analysis where the data is given in the form of matrix, graphs, and numbers to be explained, verified, and concluded [10].

The data collected by the writer are varied but not limited to the corruption rate in Afghanistan and demographic particularities of both perpetrators and victims of *bacha bazi*.

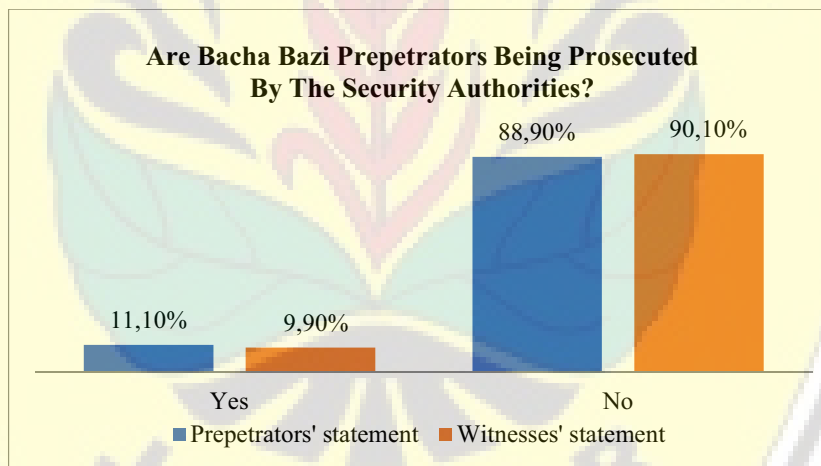
**3. Results and Discussion**

The practice of *bacha bazi* has been around the Afghan society for centuries. As the tradition that put those kids or *bacha* in danger, some actors have been trying to stop the undergoing practice. Nevertheless, the practice is still happening and it does seem to be unstoppable. Some factors that are affecting the tradition are the corruption rate, education rate, including the illiterate rate and the poverty rate in Afghanistan. Those factors play abig role in the existence of *bacha bazi* itself.

The corruption index of Afghanistan may also be the answer of why *bacha bazi* grows in Afghanistan. The country is on the 4<sup>th</sup> rank of the most corrupt country in the world based on the report by transparency.org as an international non-governmental organization of corruption reduction. That situation explained the high rate of corruption in Afghanistan that might actually take part not only in the spreading and growth of *bacha bazi* but also the abuse of power within the government and people put into power in Afghanistan.

The high rate of corruption shows that in Afghanistan justice is a commodity that can be bought by those who happened to have more money and power than others. The transaction of justice is most likely to happen when the judges make a little less than enough money from their job [11]. The abuse of power occurring in Afghanistan makes it easy for perpetrators to run from the crime they have committed. The security authorities do not prosecute almost all of the perpetrators due to the big chance of corruption in Afghanistan. The perpetrators are whom they call as ,those who are involved in the abducting and the practice of *bacha bazi*.

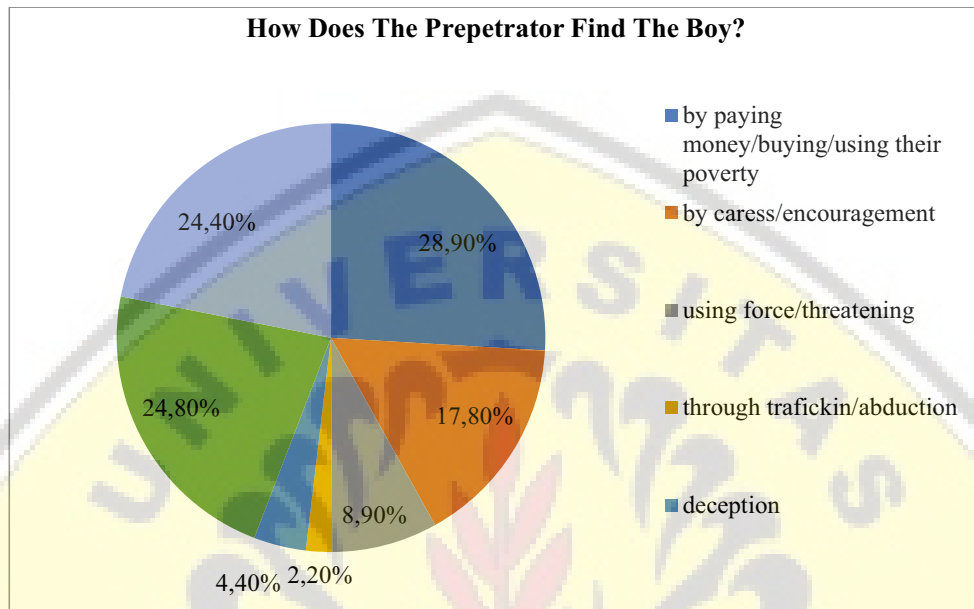
**Figure 1.** Perpetrators are Prosecuted by The Security Authorities



(Source: AIHRC, 2014)

There are ways to find and abduct the victims of *bacha bazi*. Most of the victims are trapped in the cycle of *bacha bazi* because of the poverty and that let the perpetrators find their way and “buy” the boys or *bacha* from their family. The second popular way to find and abduct the boys is through the family and friends who may know those boys and may be able to deliver the boys to the perpetrators forseveralamounts of money. The diagram below explains all other ways possible for perpetrators to find and abduct the boys.

**Figure 2.** Ways of Finding the Victims of *Bacha bazi*



(Source: AIHRC, 2014)

The poverty index of Afghanistan was raising from 2007 to 2017. It grew for 4% from 2007-08 to 2011-2012 before increased sharply within 2016-17. The poverty gap also grew by 5 % in total from 2007-08 to 2016-17. The trend seems to keep increasing every year, and it becomes a severe problem and a trigger to the practice of the cause of *bacha bazi*.

**Table 1.** Poverty Headout, Poverty Gap, And Squared Poverty Gap 2007-2017

Indicator	2007-08	2011-12	2016-17
Poverty rate	34%	38%	55%
Urban poverty rate	26%	25%	42%
Rural poverty rate	36%	42%	59%
Poverty gap	7%	10%	15%
Squared poverty gap	2%	4%	6%

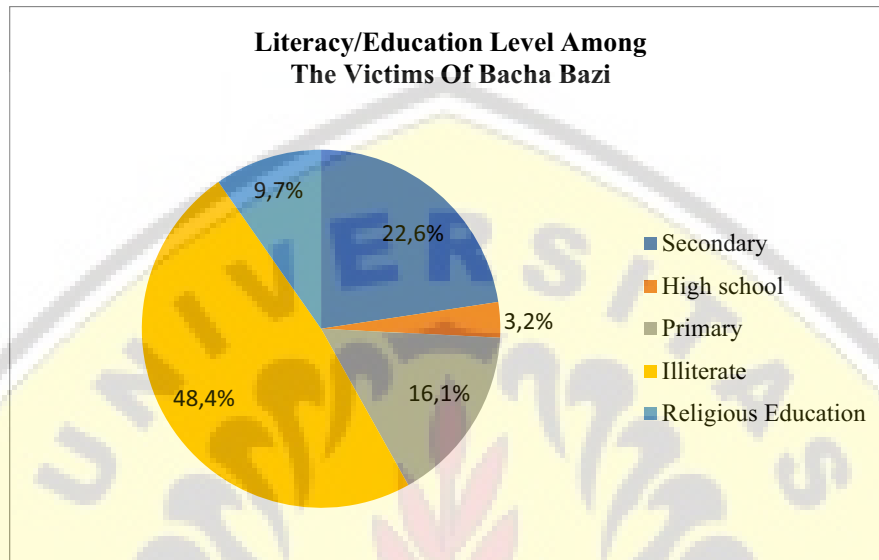
Source: NSIA, World Bank staff estimates, NRVA2007,2011 and ALCS 2016

The data shows us that poverty is the biggest to cause the boys to be trapped in *bacha bazi*. This leads to the fact that most of the victims of *bacha bazi* are at the age between 13 to 16 years old. The age group targeted as the victim is most vulnerable one as they do not have proper education due to the high rate of poverty. Most of the victims are illiterate which make them prone to exploitation and violence. Only 3% of them made it to high school while the rest should be satisfied with primary, secondary, and the religious school.

The illiteracy rate does not seem to be decreasing with the fact that most of the *bachas* have to be on service for 24 hours. This case stops the *bachas* to go to school altogether and trapped within the cycle. Most of the *bachas* are going to be perpetrators in their adult lives for they are lack of soft skills and formal education [12]. It is also hard for the victims to bounce back to their real life as they do not have anything to hold onto.



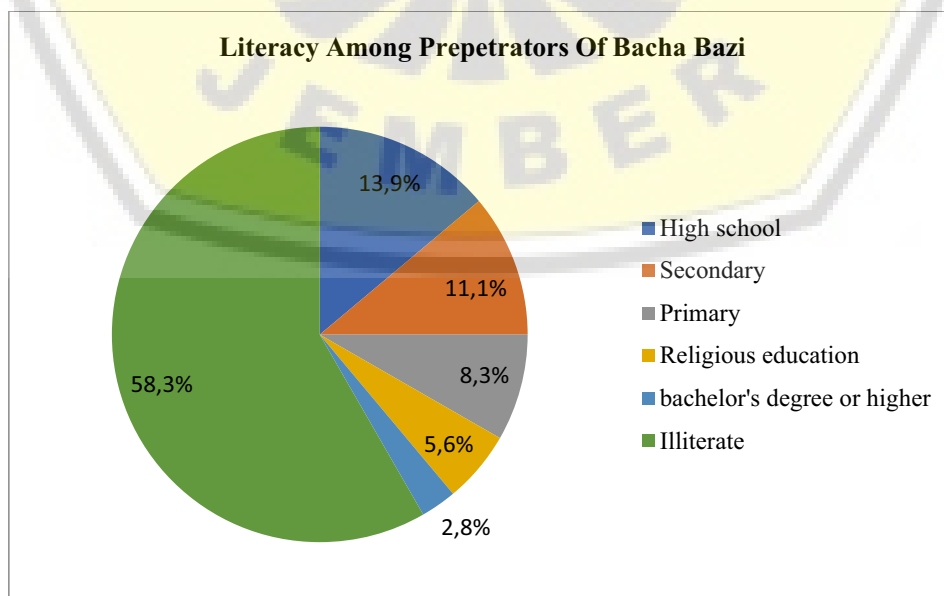
**Figure 3.** Illiteracy/ Education Rate of *Bacha bazi*Victims



(Source: AIHRC, 2014)

The data on perpetrators' education becomes crucial as it shows us that most of the perpetrators are illiterate. Although the small part of perpetrators has got their BA, one of the most interesting points is the fact that 5,6% of the perpetrators have religious studies. This shows that the practice of *bacha bazi* goes beyond the religious beliefs itself that the studies will not stop the perpetrators from practicing the tradition. The diagram below explains the details of education among the perpetrators.

**Figure 4.** Literacy Level Among Perpetrators



Other than the fact that illiteracy is one of the most significant problems along with the poverty in Afghan society that affects the growth and spreading of *bacha bazi*, Afghan government realized that human rights need to be the part of the day-to-day conversation in the society. In order to make sure that it is done the right way, the Ministry of Education and AIHRC (Afghan Independent Human rights Commission) have a collaboration project to introduce human rights through the education system. They have set the curriculum as written on table 1 below,

**Table 2.** Human Rights Curriculum Contents (Source: Nadery, 2001)

	Primary classes - Grades 1-6	Secondary classes - Grades 7-9	Secondary classes - Grades 10-12
Individual and family rights	√	√	√
Individual and society		√	√
Government and political system		√	√
some essential concepts of human rights		√	√

The securitization process in combating human insecurity of *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan does not seem to stop the practice to grow. Some factors shut the securitization process such as the high corruption index, high poverty index, and high illiterate index in Afghanistan. High corruption index directly affects the securitization process. This case also explained why almost all perpetrators are not prosecuted. On the other hand, police who should be protecting the people have also involved the practice of *bacha bazi*. It is “normal” to see some policemen stopping by the *bacha bazi* dancing show [13], some even become the guard of *bacha baz* themselves [12].

From the political perspective, the practice of corruption and how justice becomes a commodity within elites in Afghanistan affect people opinion about the government. Soon enough, the people of Afghanistan spoke up about their disappointment and compared the government to the Taliban regime. Afghans said that Taliban did them wrong, but they were able to give the basic needs of the people, including security [14]. This twisted the plot where now *bacha bazi* is not only the treat of human security but also national security.

The second factor, high poverty index. The poverty index of Afghanistan increased by 2,7% in 2014 from 36,3% in 2007 to 39% before it reached its peak within 2016-17 at 55% [15]. The higher poverty index, the more likely families give up on their sons to be *bacha*. The gap between the rich and poor in Afghanistan also becomes critical data for the research. The bigger the gap, the better the chance of the rich to exploit the poor when it comes to justice and prosecution.

Now that the corruption is the elites’ cup of tea and poverty index is getting higher along with the gap that is getting bigger, it seems reasonable to call education as one way to solve everything and stop the practice of *bacha bazi*. However, the hope for education to rise to solve all the problems has been seen to be the unpopular option compared to law enforcement since the illiteracy index in Afghanistan is high. On the contrary, law enforcement has been seen as the first on the list of the solution. It is shown by the revision of entire chapter or a criminal code done by the Afghan government in 2017. This so-called right option has been long awaited by the public although to see what has been happening during the securitization process that nothing changed as long as corruption is still there and poverty is multiplying.

To begin with, Afghanistan has already set a curriculum based on human rights that are designed to make students understand about human rights better. This curriculum has been established since 2004 after an agreement between the Afghan Ministry of Education and AIHRC in the same year [16]. Although the curriculum has not been introduced to all schools in Afghanistan up until now, this curriculum might be the beginning of the solution for *bacha bazi*. The curriculum covers every stage

of education in Afghanistan from the primary grade to high school with progressive teaching about human rights [16]. The curriculum will be featured by real stories based on Afghan day-to-day life reflecting human rights and issues surrounding it along with human rights messages and values [16].

Although the curriculum seems to be the perfect start to combat the practice of *bacha bazi* as the act of human rights violation and a threat towards the human security, the curriculum may also need to be modified in order to be able to be applied properly. The status quo that sows Afghan society is not very big in education due to the poverty rate makes it impossible for the kids to even have education in the first place. So it is either the education becomes more inclusive or Afghan is not coming close to a solution to *bacha bazi*. One way to make the education more inclusive is through a campaign and the availability of human rights consultation to make sure that people will always have proper information about their rights. The authors also suggest making the range of age group wider to provide the same education on human rights for adults. Another important key is the involvement of the religious figures in Afghanistan for the public of Afghanistan would value it better.

#### 4. Conclusions

We can tell that speech act and condemnation towards the practice of *bacha bazi* has not been showing a tad of result in the society. The next question is how we can trust the law enforcement to work when it is the matter of values that we are facing? *Bacha bazi* is a tradition, a communal practice, something people have been living for and passed through generation to generation. To put the practice to discontinue is not merely the matter of prosecuting those who practice it, but to change the values within the community. This is when education becomes very crucial. The illiterate index in Afghanistan is high, but it does not mean that the values transfer can not be done.

Education comes in various type and form. It is now a thing to talk about informal education where people, adults, and kids, are given the understanding of specific values that will enrich their knowledge about their rights as human beings and as citizens of a country who are equal in the eye of law. It is also essential to build strong values of human rights, equality, and justice within society. As for the result, we could expect the people to understand their rights, how to protect it and the justice system that should see them as equal. Education is also seen as a solution to a socio-cultural problem that will provide the people with proper filter towards inappropriate practice in the society.

So as long as education is not there to prepare people's understandings about certain values for the law enforcement to work and put the practice of *bacha bazi* to stop, the criminal code revised to stop the practice will be just another trial that won't work the way we want it to be. For it is not the problem of halting an ordinary crime, but to take a tradition out of the society that has been practicing it for centuries. The effect of human rights-based curriculum on Afghan society and the growth of certain issues of human rights, specially *bacha bazi*, is yet to be seen. However, just like in some countries in the world with sex education to prevent the growth of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation, we can see the potential of the human rights-based curriculum to be the answer to prevent and stop the violation of human rights, especially the practice of *bacha bazi*.

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