



19 March 2014 - Sexual exploitation of boys remains one of the least talked about abuses in Afghanistan. The practice of "bacha bazi", banned by the Taliban, is an age-old custom now undergoing a resurgence.

"Before, bacha bazi (literally boy play) existed 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 News.

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.

The boys are usually enticed or abducted when they are still children and held as property by an "owner". They are mostly released when they are aged around 18, but their future is often bleak.

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.

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.

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.

"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.

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.

Source: [IRIN News](#)