



“My father told me ‘child, there is no son in this house, so you should wear these boy clothes’”: perspectives on gender norms, roles, and *bacha posh* among Afghan migrant women in Melbourne, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: In Afghanistan, strong son preferences render women with lower social capital. A practice was created to overcome this gender bias, known as *bacha posh*, which literally translates to ‘dressing up as a boy’. This exploratory study aims to understand gender roles, identities, and experiences of Afghan women in order to understand why this cultural practice has arisen.

Design: Utilising a social constructivist approach, qualitative data was collected from Afghan migrant women in Melbourne, Australia, using semi-structured in-depth interviews (n=10) and a group discussion (n=1). The interviews were conducted in Dari, translated and transcribed to English and thematically analysed using NVivo 12.

Results: Key findings identified include the perception of an easy transition for girls to become and return from being *bacha posh*, community members knowing *bacha posh* are girls but concealing the truth to maintain family honour, and societal and familial son preferences playing a significant role in becoming *bacha posh*. Most participants perceived *bacha posh* to be an unnecessary practice, but understood that it may be an act of desperation forced upon them by the rigidity of Afghan society.

Conclusions: This exploratory analysis makes an important contribution to understanding gender roles, identities and *bacha posh* in Afghanistan, and is the first qualitative study exploring how gender roles and norms in Afghanistan have led to the *bacha posh* phenomenon. Exploring how social and gender norms and son preferences contribute to the emergency of *bacha posh* is critical to understand challenges faced by this group, and how these power structures influence daily living.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has a long history of deep-rooted patriarchal values, which have created strict gender roles that, in much of the country, have changed little over time (Abadi et al., 2012; Bahri, 2014). Afghanistan ranks poorly on a range of international measures of gender inequality, with women experiencing considerable disadvantage across a range of empowerment and participation indicators. The 2018 Gender Inequality Index (GII) for Afghanistan was 0.575, indicating substantial inequalities between women and men, and Afghanistan ranked 143 of 162 countries globally (UNDP 2019).

1.1. Gender roles, identity and equality in Afghanistan

Throughout the complex history of Afghanistan, women's roles have been shaped by the social, political and economic structures in their lives

(Rostami-Povey, 2007). During the Soviet invasion in the 1970s, women had access to education and worked in health, education, science and as civil servants (Rostami-Povey, 2007). However, this was only a freedom to a minority of women living in urban areas who were financially well-off (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Theoretically, all women had access to these opportunities but not all women could exercise their rights and seize their chance to study, work and make their own choices (Rostami-Povey, 2007). In Afghanistan social group identity (typically based on ethnicity) trumps the individual identity. Afghan women are integral parts of their familial unit and they often do not separate their personal needs from the needs of their families (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Despite the importance and respect of Afghan women, traditional cultural roles complicate gendered relations in Afghan society.

Afghan men are entrusted with safeguarding their family's honour, often expressed through exerting control over female family members (Moghadam, 1992). Afghan men are perceived as masculine when they

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protect and provide for their female dependents (Wimpelmann et al., 2020). Patriarchal tribal customs override religious texts, particularly related to education. Many Afghan women are illiterate, as their only source of education is from men about Islamic ideologies and religious texts (Moghadam, 1992). Men may manipulate or distort Islamic ideologies to control and suppress the lives of women (Kissane, 2012; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). These ideologies then shape laws pertaining to women, such as land ownership, divorce and the right to deny a marriage proposal.

The Taliban, a religious extremist group, has been present in Afghanistan for over 25 years (Weigand, 2017), emerging from the Afghan Civil war (1994), and rising to power to establish a totalitarian Islamic state across three-quarters of the country (1996-2001) until total control of the Afghan government in 2021. Under Taliban rule, there were attacks at schools, brutal civilian killings and poisoning of young girls (Kissane, 2012). In Taliban controlled areas and provinces, it was extremely difficult for girls to receive an education, including Islamic studies (Human Rights Watch 2020). Although Taliban are no longer openly opposed to girls attending school, girls are rarely allowed to attend school past puberty (Human Rights Watch 2020). The public-school system lacks funding and resources, such as electricity, infrastructure, and lack of staff and materials (Ministry of Education 2020). In 2018, only 38% of students enrolled in school were female (EMIS 2018). For girls to be allowed to attend school, gender-segregated classrooms with female teachers are preferred; however, only 38% of teachers in Kabul are female (Ministry of Education, 2020), thus limiting access. Most schools are in Kabul, thus limiting educational access to girls living outside the capital. Taliban has a history of oppressing Afghan women and girls, despite announcing to the global community that they have changed. In August 2021, the Taliban rapidly swept to power across Afghanistan, and emerging reports indicate that their brutalization and oppression of women and girls continues, with forced early marriage to Talibs, destruction of educational degrees, and legitimate fear for the lives of women with public-facing roles.

Gender inequality in Afghanistan undermines the health of women and girls (Acerra et al., 2009), as evidenced by high rates of gender-based violence, forced early marriage, early childbirth and maternal mortality (Samar et al., 2014). Women also face particular barriers accessing healthcare, with few women able to make the independent choice to seek health services. Families may be more willing for women and girls to receive care from female health workers, but access is limited by small numbers of female health workers. Moreover, some Afghans perceive gender equality to be an elitist foreign-backed issue, a Western ideal created to undermine the Afghan culture (Kissane, 2012; Sawitri, 2017), which has led to substantial backlash from men when gender equality programmes are proposed (Bahri, 2014; Sawitri, 2017).

1.2. *Bacha posh*

Historically around the world, there is evidence of women who have taken on the role of being a man and girls who have had to live as boys (Roshni, 2020). Even today similar practices exist, particularly in Afghanistan. In this context of rigid gender roles and inequalities, some Afghan families engage in a practice known in Dari as *bacha posh* [literally 'dressing up as a boy'] (Nordberg, 2014). *Bacha posh* refers to young girls who are dressed and treated as boys for a period (typically birth until puberty when it becomes more difficult to hide birth sex). Although there is limited research on the emergence and prevalence of the practice, *bacha posh* can be found all over Afghanistan and across most ethnic groups (Lalthlamuanpuii and Suchi, 2020). The decision for a girl to become a *bacha posh* lies primarily with the girls' parents, as does the decision for a girl to stop being *bacha posh* and return to living as a girl. When a girl becomes a *bacha posh*, her hair is cut short, she dresses in *peran tombon* (traditional Afghan male clothing), and she takes a male name (Nordberg, 2014). Her status in the family and society elevates, and she no longer performs tasks typically reserved for Afghan

girls, such as housework and cooking. Instead, she can play outside with other boys, go to school or even work (Nordberg, 2014). In the eyes of the community, she is male, so she does not need a chaperone and can even escort her female family members outside (Nordberg, 2014).

Despite attention in popular media from journalists and filmmakers, discussion of *bacha posh* in the academic literature is limited. A book by Nordberg (Nordberg, 2014) noted that families may have daughters dress as boys, due to the pressure of son preference to elevate social standing. Others have noted that *bacha posh* benefits households by participating in income-generating activities and increasing the mobility of female family members (Sawitri, 2017; Nordberg, 2014). Some parents want their daughters to experience opportunities only available to boys (Åhäll, 2018). Although there is no prevalence of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan, estimates suggest at least one *bacha posh* per neighbourhood (Nordberg, 2014; Arbabzadah, 2013). A recent survey in Kabul and Nangahar found that 7% of women reported they were raised as a *bacha posh* (Corboz et al., 2019).

1.3. *Afghan migrants in Australia*

The earliest documented Afghan migration to Australia was in 1838 for the camel trade. From the mid-1990s, migration from Afghanistan to Australia has grown rapidly due to the war and persisting ethnic tensions (ABS, 2018). The 2016 census recorded 46,799 Afghanistan-born people in Australia, with almost 40% residing in Victoria (ABS, 2018). The Victorian government areas with the most Afghani communities are within the Casey and Greater Dandenong areas (ABS, 2018). Afghans in the global diaspora (including Australia) have been able to maintain their cultural identity, norms and traditions living in housing localities where there are a large number of Afghans dwelling (Sadat, 2008). In areas such as these, there is a strong belief that deviating too far away from the cultural norms can result in bringing shame to one's family (Sadat, 2008). It is well documented that migration and resettlement can lead to changes in communities' gender norms and practices (Gottardo and Cymment, 2019), however no research has explored Afghan diaspora communities' views of *bacha posh*.

This is an exploratory qualitative study that aims to explore gender norms and roles, including the perceptions and understandings of *bacha posh*, among Afghan migrant women currently residing in Victoria, Australia. We use an exploratory research approach to generate information about emerging opinions and explanations about *bacha posh*, that would be a 'tool to think with' to stimulate further research, given that the issues we seek to understand are not well defined in the literature. We seek to understand how Afghan women perceive gender roles and identity in Afghan society, how these roles are socially constructed, and why *bacha posh* practice has arisen. Speaking to Afghan migrant women allows for a deeper reflection of gender constructs and gender roles, topics rarely discussed in Afghanistan. Australia creates a neutral environment where sensitive matters and new topics like gender constructs can be discussed more openly and comfortably and with fewer security concerns. Lastly, we explore whether *bacha posh* challenges traditional gender roles and identities in the Afghan community, and how migrant women perceive the impacts of the *bacha posh* practice upon reflecting and comparing their experiences in Afghanistan and their experiences now in Australia.

2. Materials and methods

This study was conducted in greater Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, where the largest population of Afghan migrants reside (ABS, 2018). We conducted a qualitative study using a social constructivist paradigm, semi-structured in-depth interviews (n=10) (IDIs) and a group discussion (n=3). Method triangulation was utilised to ensure we collected comprehensive range of information about the *bacha posh* phenomenon.

2.1. Study participants, recruitment and sampling

Participants were able to speak and understand Dari, English, or both, of an Afghan ethnicity and born in Afghanistan. Eligible participants were women aged 18 years and over, currently residing in Victoria, and able to give informed consent. The research team had no prior relationship to the participants before the study. Participants were made aware the study was part of the lead researcher's [NH] Master of Public Health program. Community organisations supporting Afghan migrants, hospitals, and refugee and migrant services helped facilitate recruitment by distributing flyers in Dari and English to community members, and contacting the lead researcher with interested potential participants. Flyers were also posted online to community groups and distributed through social media. We aimed to obtain information power within the sample size, due to the data collection and analysis methods, challenges in discussing sensitive topics with a small, marginalised group, and quality and richness of the interviews. Using the principles of information power, lower numbers of participants in qualitative research can be appropriate if rich and relevant data are obtained (Malterud et al., 2016).

2.2. Study instruments

Previous literature has suggested social factors leading to the *bacha posh* practice. The social constructivist paradigm assumes individuals are not solitary figures who face the world by themselves; rather, knowledge and worldviews are formed by shared activities and co-operation between individuals and those around them (Stetsenko and Arievitich, 1997). Using a social constructivist lens, semi-structured question guides were created to foster rich discussions within the IDIs and group discussion. The following topics were explored: (1) typical gender roles in Afghanistan for men and women; (2) perceptions and experiences regarding gender equality in various areas (e.g. education, employment and healthcare) in Afghanistan compared to Australia; (3) perceptions and experiences regarding *bacha posh*, (reasons for, and benefits and consequences). Interviews explored participants' own experiences of gender roles and life in Afghanistan and whether and how this changed after migrating to Australia. Socio-demographic information was also collected.

2.3. Data collection and management

The lead researcher [NH] is a female Australian of Afghan ethnicity, who can speak both Dari and English, and was a Master of Public Health student at the time of data collection. NH conducted all IDIs and facilitated the group discussion. Prior to participation, women provided written informed consent. IDIs and the group discussion were audio recorded. The IDIs lasted for up to 50 minutes and the group discussion lasted for 75 minutes. Participants received a \$50AUD gift voucher to compensate for their time and travel costs. All interviews were conducted in Dari. The audio recordings were translated from Dari to English and transcribed in English simultaneously by the lead researcher.

2.4. Data analysis

Line-by-line coding of interview transcripts were conducted by the lead researcher [NH] and reviewed by MAB, using NVivo (QSR International (1999) [v12]). Utilising an inductive reflexive thematic analysis initial nodes (Braun and Clarke, 2019) were created based on the common themes throughout each transcript. The nodes were organised into major key themes, which included 16 parent themes, with 0 to 10 child nodes each. A codebook was created with clear definitions of parent themes, child nodes and an example which related to the code from the transcripts. We developed Afghan pseudonyms for participants, to protect confidentiality.

2.5. Ethical approval

The study obtained ethics approval from the Medicine and Dentistry Human Ethics Sub-Committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne (ethics ID number: 1954732.1).

This paper is reported according to the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research [COREQ] (Tong et al., 2007).

3. Results

Ten IDIs and one group discussion are included in the analysis, and no potential participants refused to participate or dropped out. Table 1 reports the sociodemographic characteristics of participants. All participants were female, and from the Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik ethnic groups, and have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. One participant (Masooda) was a *bacha posh*, six participants knew about *bacha posh*, and one had a friend who was *bacha posh*. The remaining participants did not recognize the term '*bacha posh*', but recognised the practices that the term refers to. The women who knew about *bacha posh* all stated that it was a practice that lasted until the girl who was *bacha posh* reached puberty, which meant she could no longer conceal her biological sex.

Research findings are organised according to major themes of transitioning to *bacha posh*, how *bacha posh* interact with society and family, transitioning from *bacha posh* and the impact of migration on gender roles and norms and how this affects *bacha posh*. The findings presented draw on Masooda's lived experience, supplemented with contextual reflections from the IDI and focus group participants.

3.1. Transitioning to *bacha posh*

Masooda is from a family with five daughters, and was 8 years old when her male cousin was martyred by the Taliban. Prior to his death, his mother had made newly tailored *peran tomban* [male Afghan clothes] for him, which was suddenly given to Masooda instead. Masooda could not comprehend why she was given male clothing as a girl. Her family gave her no explanation and expected her to know her new role as she started wearing male clothing. It was an unspoken agreement that she had become *bacha posh*.

"My father told me child, there is no son in this house, so you should wear these boy clothes." (Masooda, 53 years old)

Prior to her cousin's death, Masooda's family would often joke around and call her a male name because she kept her hair short and wore pants instead of dresses. She believed that this was the reason she was chosen to become *bacha posh* and not her sisters, although the reason for her selection as *bacha posh* was never openly discussed. Masooda began to wear male clothing continually and enjoyed wearing them. She developed a masculine role by changing her behaviour and actions.

"So, from 8 years of age until around 16 years of age I didn't pierce my ears, because boys in Afghanistan do not pierce their ears. I wouldn't wear any jewellery." (Masooda, 53 years old)

Although abrupt, Masooda was able to transform herself into a male and live as a *bacha posh* for 7 years, removing feminine traits from her appearance and behaviour. Masooda stated no challenges were faced when transitioning into a *bacha posh*. There were some things she could not do with her sisters such as make up and shopping for clothes, but she did not feel like she was missing out on anything at the time.

Similarly, Sadaf shared the experience of a close friend who was a *bacha posh*. Her friend became *bacha posh* because she had lost her father at a young age and so she needed to become the bread winner for her family. Sadaf's friend was one of 8 daughters and she was the youngest sisters. She was also given male clothes one day and forced to take on the role not only of a male, but of the head of a household. Sadaf stated that their family of 9 females had no way to survive on their own in

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

	IDI participants (n=10)	FGD participants (n=1 FGD, 3 participants)
Length of time in Australia		
< 1 year	0	0
1-2 years	2	0
3-4 years	4	0
5-6 years	2	1
> 7 years	2*	2
Occupation		
Homemaker	9	0
Hairdresser	1	0
Community Engagement Officer	0	1
Child Care	0	1
Educator	0	1
Age		
25-29	0	1
30-34	0	0
35-39	2	1
40-44	1	1
45-49	1	0
50-54	2	0
55-59	3	0
60-64	0	0
65-69	1	0
Marital status		
Married	7	3
Widowed	2	0
Divorced	1	0
Ethnic group they identified with		
Pashtun	1	0
Hazara	6	1
Tajik	2	2
Afghan	1**	0
Gender		
Female	10	3

* n=2 One participant has been in Australia for 27 years and another has been in Australia for 30 years

** n=1 The participant did not want to state which ethnic group they identified with

Afghanistan once the father had passed away. Within her role as a *bacha posh* Sadaf's friend was able to work as a tailor with her uncle. Becoming *bacha posh* was a way to increase her and her family's productivity and access to assets, providing opportunities that would not be otherwise available.

“You have to know in Afghanistan if you are left without a father, you are left with nothing. You are left with absolutely nothing.” (Sadaf, 40 years old, group discussion)

For both girls, transitioning to *bacha posh* was as simple as wearing male clothing. Male clothing gave them the opportunity to develop masculine characteristics and allowed them to have freedoms that Afghan girls would not have, such as working outside the home. Aziza reflected on the traditional gender archetypes in Afghan society that limited opportunities for women:

“In Afghanistan, women are *bechoraya* [helpless]. They must be controlled by men, they are below them, even if you want to work, you cannot work; there is only housework” (Aziza, 44 years old)

The participants felt that men had a much higher position than women in all levels of society (individual, familial and community level). Many participants expressed that women were always on the bottom of the social ladder. The transition from being a girl to *bacha posh* was perceived as easy, because *bacha posh* had the opportunity to experience privilege they would not otherwise have as girls or women. The participants believed that one could only gain from becoming a *bacha posh*.

3.2. Why become *bacha posh*?

Participants discussed multiple reasons why girls would become *bacha posh*, but the overarching reason was son preference. First, there is a common superstitious belief which suggests that if one's youngest daughter is dressed as a boy, then the next child conceived will be a boy. In this scenario, raising a girl as *bacha posh* is an investment in the family's future stability. Second, families may act in desperation, because there is no male breadwinner, so *bacha posh* provide a means for the family to earn an income. Third, having a daughter become *bacha posh* was a parents' selfish decision, participants suggesting this was solely due to son preferences.

Masooda's mother suffered from harassment and pity from community and family members because she had five daughters and no sons. Masooda's maternal grandmother asked her mother to allow her husband to marry another wife hoping that she could raise a son. Her paternal grandfather pitied and cried for her father as he did not have any sons. Others outside the family shamed her father for only having daughters.

“One of my fathers' co-workers came over to my fathers' house one night with his daughter, she was an 18-year old girl... He then said out of nowhere, *Haji saab* [Mecca pilgrim], I want you to marry my daughter” (Masooda, 53 years old)

The father's co-worker knew Masooda's father was already married, had children and that his daughter would be a co-wife, yet he still suggested this marriage take place for his friend to have a son, to save his reputation. The participants believed there was pressure at all levels of society, on both men and women, to have a son.

“Afghans don’t like girls, they are not happy about it, if you have a son we have a *shaw shash* (day of celebration/naming and circumcision of male child) and have numerous parties, but for girls there are no celebrations, none at all” (Sahar, 45 years old)

Girls were seen as being burdens, families were afraid if they were left unmarried for too long it would lead to their daughters dishonouring the family name in some way, for example being targets for other men who could tarnish their reputation. Marriage is the cultural solution protect their daughters. All participants stated the most common scenario in life is becoming a wife to someone of their parents’ choice.

3.3. How *bacha posh* interact with society and family

Masooda felt more confident as a boy, everyone in her family and village respected her. While her sisters had to clean, cook, wash clothes and dishes and serve others, Masooda did not. Instead, Masooda worked outside with her father in typically male roles, such as cleaning snow from the gutters, gardening and buying groceries. Becoming *bacha posh* transformed her household role and responsibilities from feminine to masculine. *Bacha posh* was therefore a method of redistribution of household labour and traditional gender roles. She gave an example of how families ‘played along’ with her new role:

“My grandfather would always come to our house when I was wearing male clothing and he was very old, white hairs, he would treat me the best and give me money. I would say to him ‘why don’t you give money to my sisters?’ He would say ‘because they are girls’ and I would say, ‘I am also a girl!’”

“My older sister was a tailor, and she would make me more boy clothes out of her own enthusiasm and would make me wear them.” (Masooda, 53 years old)

Becoming *bacha posh* allowed Masooda’s grandfather to express his desire for a grandson, and for her sisters to have a brother to dote on. This highlights the different expectations, responsibilities, and treatment she experienced by shifting gender roles.

“When we went places, like during Eid [Islamic celebration], we would go to my aunties’ houses and my sisters would go get ready. When it was my turn [to get ready] I would say ‘No, I don’t want to go, why should I?’...then my sisters were not allowed to go” (Masooda, 53 years old)

Masooda had a newfound authority with her male identity; if she did not want to go somewhere, she would not be forced. She stated her sisters, resent her for ruining their plans and forcing them to stay home. Many participants used the term *zaanchu*, which is a derogative term for a man who is “kind” to his wife, thus making him weak. Men who were called *zaanchu* would feel ashamed and be taunted by others. Exerting power and control over family relations was considered an essential component of masculine identity and responsibility.

Sadaf’s friend was *bacha posh* which enabled her to work as a tailor with her uncle and become the bread winner of her family. Although women are legally able to work in Afghanistan, the participants stated that only a few actually did so, and mostly only in Kabul. Women were often denied permission by their families to work outside the home on the grounds that staying at home was much safer for women, as workplaces have been targeted by bombs and explosions. Some women experienced harassment, Naseema witnessed women shopping alone and random men touching and pinching them. Men and boys were not subject to the same restrictions on activities outside the home. Becoming a *bacha posh* was a way to access to resources and opportunities that would not be otherwise possible or would be very difficult had she not been a ‘boy’. It was also a method to protect herself from the dangers Afghan women face when they work in Afghan society, as *bacha posh* afforded her a more masculine identity.

Most participants believed that family and close friends treated *bacha posh* as true boys, affording them the same responsibilities and privileges as boys. For example, if a boy was in a room with a girl, it was seen as his responsibility to make sure they are not alone or close to each other, but if a boy was alone in a room with a girl who was *bacha posh* this would be accepted. Participants believed that most family members who knew that a girl was *bacha posh* would accept this and treat the child as a boy.

3.4. The consequences of becoming *bacha posh*

Despite the privileges and benefits gained from becoming a *bacha posh* in society, there were risks if her identity was to be exposed. For example, the story below shows that community members may “reject” the notion that a *bacha posh* is a “real man”. As a result, some people may take advantage of *bacha posh*, which could lead to sexual harassment, rape, blackmail and forced marriage to protect the girl’s reputation and family honour.

“She had come back from buying some yogurt, crying, the store vendor knew that she was a girl. She was going through puberty so it was obvious and he started following her wanting to do something [molest her]...the man was still chasing her and saw there were others so he gave up finally... She could not leave the house after that, everyone knew she was a girl, she had a bad name [her honour was tarnished] within the village.” (Sadaf, 40 years old, group discussion)

Due to these risks, some families moved around to keep communities from finding out about their *bacha posh*:

“Slowly when the girls reach puberty, they know that the *bacha posh* are girls, the father moves houses constantly so people do not find out that his sons are actually daughters... girls cannot live normally as *bacha posh*, they will be found out and could be raped” (Sadaf, 40 years old, group discussion)

Life in Afghanistan for women and girls is filled with hardship, even if most of society chooses to ignore *bacha posh*, there will still be some who are adamant on using their power as a privileged person in society to bring misfortune and suffering to them.

3.5. Transitioning from *bacha posh*

Masooda ceased being a *bacha posh* when she turned 16 years old, once her body went through puberty she felt embarrassed to continue the façade. Once feminine clothing was worn, her duties and the treatment she received from others became the same as her sisters. Masooda stated that it was difficult adjusting to doing household chores again, until a few years after she was married. Before she was married, she still did not care for household duties, however after she was married she was forced by her husband and his family to learn how to cook and perform household duties.

“In the past I couldn’t and I didn’t want to at all, the chores of girls... yeah, slowly, slowly I learnt and now it has become like a habit... now I can cook for 200 people” (Masooda, 53 years old)

When asked if transitioning back to a girl was difficult, she stated that it would be difficult to stay as a *bacha posh*, as it would be obvious to outsiders that she was a girl after a certain age. Masooda said that no one forced her to stop being a *bacha posh*; rather, as she grew older, she felt embarrassed to continue acting as a boy.

In individual interviews, most participants believed that the transition back to living as a girl was not difficult. Almost all referred to the transition as *kalon gap nest* [not a big deal], as she merely wore male clothing and was always biologically a girl. They believed that there would be hardship for a few days, but slowly the girl would find herself again. However, in the group discussion, the women agreed that there could be difficulties in transitioning, particularly in Afghanistan where there are virtually no psychologists or therapists available to support

the girl through the transition. Some felt that habits formed from when she was a *bacha posh* would be challenging to remove:

“Because if you play a man’s role for 15 years, the role of a man becomes a part of your subconscious” (Sadaf, 40 years old, group discussion)

Most of the women understood that one would only become *bacha posh* out of *majbooryat* [desperation]. They believed that the rigid rules for women, for example needing a male chaperone to leave the house, explained the practice of *bacha posh*. Others stated that *bacha posh* was completely unnecessary and that only someone naïve would put their child through this practice.

“There are no benefits whatsoever, it’s only because the father wants a son, but what is the point of confusing your daughter [*charhak*, literally ‘spinning her round and round’], when everyone pretty much knows she is a girl anyway. The girl will become heartbroken” (Halema, 50 years old)

All participants believed the transition was inevitable. Although families and parents could hide their daughter and benefit from it, it is only for a short period of time up until puberty or adolescence, so it was best not to confuse these girls. The belief that everyone has their roles to play, and that Afghans can adapt themselves easily within a society was illustrated. They believed that because the role of being a boy was over, it was simply time start over to play the role of a girl.

3.6. Impact of migration on gender roles and norms and how this effects *bacha posh*

Masooda firmly believed that *bacha posh* only occurs because families want a son. She stated that Afghan parents and their children are different after migrating to Australia. In Australia, Afghan parents are not concerned and do not hold much importance about how their children dress and act, compared to in Afghanistan. She gave an example of a family friend who has a daughter who is 19 years old and dresses in male clothing out of her own will. She asked her family friend about how she felt about her daughter dressing that way, and was told that her daughter has the freedom to do whatever she likes, and she would not force her to dress a certain way.

All participants felt this freedom and that they no longer felt trapped like they did in Afghanistan. When the women were asked if *bacha posh* would ever occur in Australia, they unanimously believed there was no need to be *bacha posh*, because in Australia everyone has the freedom of choice to be who they want to be. They all believed a daughter can do all the things a son can do and vice versa and that Australia is a place which facilitates this.

“I have one daughter myself and the way I feel is that this one daughter has much greater strength than one hundred sons would have” (Nilofar, 57 years old)

The participants stated that their husbands did not care about the gender of their child in Australia, suggesting that strong son preferences may relax to a degree after migration. Fathers will allow women and girls to work in Australia because there is no social sense of shame or of honour being tarnished and instead they are proud that their daughters can do things independently. These perceptions of women’s independence and ability to work may further reduce the need for *bacha posh*. Many women described their anger towards the men in their early lives, as men’s decisions resulted in them having to leave school at a young age or being married early to a man they did not know. Since coming to Australia, they decided to raise their daughters differently to ensure they did not have to go down the same path that was chosen for them.

“I have 3 daughters myself, I told them you can marry whoever you want it has nothing to do with me, you find the person yourself, it

is your life, you will be the one living with them.” (Sahar, 45 years old)

Since migrating from Afghanistan to Australia, attitudes, actions, and behaviours have changed in both Afghan men and women. Participants believed that there is no need to conform to rigid gender roles and norms as women and men are perceived to have equal rights. The participants all stated that there was no reason for *bacha posh* in Australia, as families are less desperate for a son. Individuals can live safely without a son unlike in Afghanistan, rendering *bacha posh* as unnecessary.

4. Discussion

Our study shows how socially-constructed gender roles and identities influence the position of Afghan women in society, and how *bacha posh* can circumnavigate rigid roles. Assuming a new role as *bacha posh* was straightforward, illustrating the clearly delineated masculine and feminine roles in society. Our analysis highlights how strong son preferences in Afghanistan contribute to the creation of *bacha posh* practices. Most participants did not perceive *bacha posh* as a harmful practice. Even the woman who was *bacha posh* regarded her experience as simply wearing male clothing for a time, then changing back. *Bacha posh* was considered a desperate act to have a son, and with significant impact on social capital. There was a perception of limited negative impacts on the girls. The cultural understanding for discussions about *bacha posh* is to only respond at the surface level without going in depth into how society has created the practice. Additionally, there was no discussion regarding the girl having to unlearn the way she talked, walked, her clothing choices, and her outward appearance and how this could affect her gender identity (Roshni, 2020). This can be explained with the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon whereby the participants knew of the gender inequality in Afghanistan and the problems arising from having a strong gender preference but collectively ignored what perpetuates *bacha posh*, what effects the practice has on all levels of society (individual, familial and societal) and how the practice itself instills the belief that sons are necessary, but daughters are expendable (Miller and Prentice, 1994).

Using the intersectionality of peace, we can understand *bacha posh* not as an individualised experience but as a method to access larger structural inequalities (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert, 2019). Unequal power relations, rigid gender roles, lack of productivity, access to assets and opportunities are key drivers of *bacha posh* practice. Afghan women are unable to be fully independent and are forced to rely on men to live. Government laws, customary laws and policies made primarily by a council of men dictate what women can do, their inheritance, rights and reinforces subordinate role and dominance in Afghan men (Ahmadi, 2015). Consistent with findings from Mannell et al.’s (Mannell et al., 2020) qualitative study, Afghan women are rarely able to make decisions on their own, including marriage and the decisions made on their behalf by a male guardian are often without consideration for their own yearnings. *Bacha posh* therefore enables women to take charge of their own lives, without the judgement and constraints that comes with being a woman in Afghanistan (Corboz et al., 2019). However, our study found that once a girl stops being *bacha posh*, they revert back to playing the female role, even with their newfound confidence, independence and strength as *bacha posh*. This is due to strong cultural norms where Afghan women are unable to dissociate their group/familial identity from their own individual identity and needs (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Moreover, there is little room for keeping a different gender identity long term in Afghan society.

In Afghanistan, son preference is socially created, and rules, laws and customs restrict women from participating fully in society. Despite the change in context, strong son preference remains in migrant and refugee communities after resettlement. Research conducted with migrant and refugee women, including Afghan women, found that there was a socio-cultural expectation to give birth to a son (Hawkey et al., 2018). If this expectation was not met, women are negatively impacted, includ-

ing post-partum depression, reproductive anxiety and familial abuse (Hawkey et al., 2018). Likewise, for Afghan women to have social standing, a son becomes a necessity, and a way for them to live without familial pressure, unwanted stress, hatred and pity from outsiders. Strong son preference and associated burdens to women is comparable both in Afghanistan and overseas. Despite this, there is no known emergence of *bacha posh* outside of Afghanistan. As the women in this study believe, Australia gives women freedom thus rendering *bacha posh* as unnecessary. Son preference persists, but instead of *bacha posh*, other negative impacts (e.g. reproductive coercion) may be present (Hawkey et al., 2018). Our study supports the claim that *bacha posh* is a desire-fulfilling practice for Afghan parents, compensating for the inability to produce a male heir (Lalthlamanpui and Suchi, 2020). *Bacha posh* is a practice which could further perpetuate rigid gender norms as it is a temporary freedom given to girls which manifests from son preference. Son preference is a harmful cultural norm, which assigns less value to women and girls, this impacts all levels of society (UNFPA, 2020).

4.1. Limitations and strengths

This study has a number of limitations. All data collected were from the perspective and experiences of Afghan women, and no men participated in the study. While the sample size was small we reached saturation and achieved information power on the emergent themes included in this analysis. Moreover, as this was an exploratory study, our findings can be used to inform future research on *bacha posh*, gender norms, and gender equality in the Afghan and Afghan migrant contexts. There was no indication that *bacha posh* practices are active within the Australian Afghan community, more research is needed to definitively conclude that this practice does not occur in Australia. Social desirability bias may have occurred during the interviews with some women not willing to share personal experiences on matters like gender equality, as they may have felt they did not want to smear the image of Afghanistan and Afghan culture. However, it should be noted that participants were comfortable to share intimate details of their experiences. As only one participant had been *bacha posh* herself, we are limited in exploring lived experiences of the practice.

A key strength of the study is that it is the first qualitative investigation on the perceptions of *bacha posh*, and the only study to explore gender norms and roles with Afghans who have migrated to Australia. The study allowed for Afghan women to discuss gender roles and gender identity in a safe and new channel, and using culturally-appropriate language (Dari) and methods. Moreover, another strength of this study is that it illustrates the willingness of Afghan women to participate in research on taboo topics like *bacha posh*.

4.2. Implications for research and practice

This study hopes to encourage more research in the area of gender norms, identities and *bacha posh* among Afghan women. There is much to learn, and many socio-cultural problems can be discovered like son preference when delving into these areas. However, there is minimal primary research on these topics or on Afghan women's life experiences in general. What we know from the research is that cultural norms and preferences remain consistent upon migration. Therefore further research can be conducted with the Afghan diaspora to understand what barriers remain for Afghan women in becoming more independent after they have migrated.

5. Conclusion

This paper makes an important contribution to understanding gender roles, identities and *bacha posh* in Afghanistan. Despite the restrictive environment, Afghan women can adapt their identities to meet the needs of their families. The Afghan diaspora living in Australia had similar views to what was documented by research in Afghanistan, regard-

ing the evolution of *bacha posh*. The preference for sons has not been completely removed upon migration. Our results align with the limited research conducted in this area, whereby *bacha posh* is a complicated practice where the narrative changes within each household; for example, the reasons to become *bacha posh*, and the experiences during years lived as a *bacha posh*. Our paper is the first qualitative study exploring how gender roles and norms in Afghanistan have led to the *bacha posh* phenomenon. Exploring how social and gender norms and son preferences contribute to the emergency of *bacha posh* is critical to understand challenges faced by Afghan women, and how power structures influence daily living. Particularly, now as Taliban has risen to power, Afghan women and girls will be left behind. Any progress made to improve women's rights in Afghanistan may be destroyed and now more than ever it is important to hear the voices of Afghan women and girls.

Contributions

NH and MAB designed the study. NH led data collection with support from MAB. NH led data analysis with support from MAB and CV. NH and MAB drafted the manuscript, and all authors reviewed the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [NH] upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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