Sexuality and gender within Afghanistan’s bacha bereesh population

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Abstract

**Purpose** – Limited evidence exists on bacha bazi, Afghanistan’s steadily revived practice involving transgenerational same-sex relationships, despite its frequent association with violence towards young males, known as bacha bereesh. This paper aims to fill this critical gap.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The author conducted an integrative literature review using qualitative and quantitative secondary data. An ecological framework for violence was applied to the findings.

**Findings** – The findings offer a comprehensive overview of bacha bazi in its modern form, including the unique health needs, sexual practices, and gender identities and orientations of bacha bereesh. The author reveals how Afghan masculine identities and male-male sexual activity occur in relation to power structures and notions of honor. Numerous risk factors increasing bacha bereesh vulnerability for violence and socio-legal barriers constraining access to crucial services are also discussed.

**Research limitations/implications** – Afghanistan’s shame-based culture limits accurate data collection by obscuring the practice and stigmatizing bacha bereesh who serve in feminized roles.

**Practical implications** – The research highlights the inadequacies of applying Western gender-binary frameworks to bacha bazi. It contributes to our understanding of sexuality, gender, masculinity, and male-directed sexual violence within Afghan culture. These insights will help us better address the health needs of this underserved population.

**Originality/value** – The lack of evidence addressing these topics highlights our paper’s originality, while the literature firmly linking violence to poor physical and psychological health outcomes emphasizes the importance of its contribution.

**Keywords** Bacha bazi, Bacha bereesh, Afghanistan, Male-male sexual activity, Gendered frameworks, Violence, Sexual exploitation, Stigma, Ecological model

**Paper type** Research paper

Introduction

Meaning “boy play” in Dari [1], bacha bazi is an ancient Central Asia practice involving transgenerational same-sex relationships that has recently experienced a revival in Afghanistan. In its modern variation, it has become largely associated with violence as adult males known as bacha bazi, or “boy players,” exploit, abuse, and/or enslave young males—including for forced social and/or sexual entertainment. These young males are referred to as bacha bereesh (“beardless youth”/“beardless boy”), bacha (“boy”), halekon (“splendid boy”), and “dancing boy.” For clarity, consistency, and out of respect for the self-identification of this population, bacha bereesh will be the term utilized in this article. Limited academic work discusses this steadily growing practice or the unique experiences, health issues, sexual practices, and gender identities and orientations of the bacha bereesh population. Investigating these topics, this article answers the following research questions:

**RQ1.** How do gender and sexuality intersect within Afghan culture? What does the practice of bacha bazi reveal about these conceptualizations of gender and sexuality?
RQ2. How are members of the bacha bereesh demographic perceived within Afghan society and internationally versus how they self-identify? What stigmas are attached to their identity?

RQ3. What are the unique health needs, particularly sexual and reproductive health (SRH), of bacha bereesh members before, during, and after their involvement in bacha bazi? How do these conceptualizations, identities, and stigmas influence health outcomes?

By synthesizing, critiquing, and building upon the existing evidence, this paper adds to the studies which have documented the limitations of applying gender binarism to third gender communities. In the process, it explores how the variance of activities documented within bacha bazi (kidnappings, prostitution, pornography, beatings, forced physical labor) and wide age range of bacha bereesh (9–25 years) complicates both word choice and health interventions. While this addition to our knowledge is significant, this research’s impact extends further by offering a new framework through which to regard the phenomenon. In uniquely applying an ecological model to this case, we provide critical theoretical and practical insights into the practice’s rise and impact. The literature firmly linking violence to poor physical and psychological health outcomes emphasizes the importance of this contribution, while the lack of research around sexuality in Afghan society and male-directed sexual violence in general highlights its originality.

Context
After beginning with a brief prelude exploring the practice’s historical roots, we offer a summary of the situation in Afghanistan from the 1970s until 2020. In addition to aiding in the understanding of how bacha bazi has evolved into its modern variation, this synopsis provides valuable insight into the conditions that have contributed to the phenomenon’s re-emergence. The section then proceeds with an overview of masculinity and sexuality within Afghan culture in which we illustrate the inadequacies of recent Western discourses on bacha bazi. Finally, it concludes with an introduction of the ecological framework of violence.

Bacha bazi: A brief history
Bacha bazi’s existence within Central Asia dates back to at least the 9th century, with some sources claiming it even predates the Islamic era, which is typically dated to begin in the 7th century. Numerous written texts document the practice, including Urdu ghazals [2] and Persian poetry, songs, and artwork. The Afghan proverb “women are for children, boys are for pleasure” is said to have stemmed from Persian folk heritage and beauty standards upholding the penile-anal penetration of “beautiful beardless boys” as the “ultimate sexual delight” (Murray et al., 1997; Khan, 2008; Emadi, 2019). Western travel memoirs from the 19th and 20th centuries vilified bacha bazi, which waned in large cities after the First World War due in part to the disproval of colonial elites (Shay, 2006). The Soviet Union, for example, enacted a number of policies aimed at its eradication. While the exact nature of these historical transgenerational same-sex relationships cannot be confirmed, Ingeborg Baldauf wrote about the practice amongst the Uzbek and Pashtun communities in Afghanistan in the 1970s. In her essay, she notes that although the relationships could be platonic, they often had sexual connotations and involved adult males anally penetrating younger males (cited in Khan, 2008).

Afghanistan: 1970s-2020
Conflict and instability have marred the last forty years in Afghanistan. In 1973, a non-violent coup overthrew the Kingdom of Afghanistan, which had ruled since 1926. A second and
A bloody coup occurred in 1978. Known as the Saur Revolution, it resulted in the Afghan Communists seizing power and served as a precursor to the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989). While difficult to substantiate, sources state that bacha bazi was commonly practiced during this time, particularly by mujahideen commanders fighting the Soviet forces (Aronowitz, 2016; Emadi, 2019; Londoño, 2012a). By the end of the war, an estimated 1.5 to 2 million Afghan civilians were killed, 600,000 to 2 million were wounded, 6 million fled to Pakistan and Iran, and at least 2 million were internally displaced (Goodson, 2001). The economy collapsed, while widespread destruction disrupted crucial education and health systems. The conflict set the ground for the Afghan Civil War (1992–1996), which, ultimately, enabled the Taliban—a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist group—to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban ruled under this totalitarian Islamic state from 1996 to 2001. Under the Taliban regime, bacha bazi became a serious criminal offence and carried a death penalty. Anecdotal evidence and media reports, however, indicate that the practice continued in secret.

In October 2001, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition led by the United States (US) invaded Afghanistan, starting the War in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and temporarily removing the Taliban from power. The armed group, however, remained active across the country and led regular attacks against Afghan authorities and coalition forces. The war concluded in 2021 when the Taliban and other allied militants mounted a major insurgent offensive that resulted in the capture of Kabul on August 15, 2021. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was, subsequently, overthrown with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan reinstated under the control of the Taliban. It is important to note here that our research and paper were completed prior to these events. The following account, therefore, documents both the situation in the country and the state of the practice until 2020. For instance, unless specified otherwise, the words “government” or “nation” (with or without the prefix “Afghan”) refer to the administration under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Events that have occurred under the Taliban regimes will be clearly identified as such. Nonetheless, we did want to acknowledge these 2021 developments—which we again reference in our concluding remarks and suggestions for future research section—so as to provide additional context to our readers.

With that in mind, our summary continues with an exploration of the deteriorating security situation between 2016 and 2017. During this time, civilian casualties reached their highest point since 2002 and more than 1.1 million Afghans were internally displaced due to conflict (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2017). At the same time, an estimated 1.7 million documented and undocumented Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan (World Bank [WB], 2019a), further straining the country’s limited infrastructure, public services, and economic opportunities. Violence continues to drive people from their homes, contributing to the nearly 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan—the second largest refugee population in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). In 2017, Afghanistan’s opium cultivation reached a record high. The country’s chief export, opium, has been linked with exacerbating insecurity, corruption, macroeconomic distortions, and drug use (see Felbab-Brown, 2017; Goodson, 2001).

Curtailing private investment, consumer demand, job creation, and educational opportunities, this insecurity has also slowed economic recovery and limited access to productive or remunerative employment. In 2016 alone, approximately 1,000 schools closed due to security issues and the net attendance rate in secondary education fell to 35% (Paiwand, 2016; Lahire, 2018). While comprising roughly 25% of the country’s 35.53 million people, only 54% of young Afghans (age 15–24) are literate and 42% are not employed or enrolled in school/vocational training (WB, 2019a). These individuals are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and/or abuse. In general, an estimated 55% of the population lives below the national poverty line (WB, 2019b), with reports that poverty is increasing. High
inequality, rapid population growth, high fertility rates, low life expectancy at birth, and severe drought conditions have aggravated the issues facing the impoverished and war-torn country. In 2017, Afghanistan ranked 168th out of 189 countries and territories on the Human Development Index (HDI) (UN Development Program [UNDP], 2018). As we will explore further, these conditions have created an environment where bacha bazi can thrive.

Masculinity and sexuality within Afghan culture

Shaped by the “interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006 p. 5), human sexuality is complex, diverse, fluid, and polymorphous (Oosterhoff and Sweetman, 2018). Gender is similarly constructed with different social and cultural values producing varying gender norms. Within Afghan culture, the word “man” is delineated through age (designated by the existence of facial hair) and gender performance, especially around penetration, with the sexual domination of other biological males conferring a status of hyper-masculinity (Khan, 2008; Dunne, 1998; Murray et al., 1997; Schut and van Baarle, 2017; Pashang et al., 2018). Although biologically male, bacha bereesh are labeled “not-men” due to their lack of facial hair, role as the receptive partner in penetrative anal sex, and other feminized actions (wearing make-up, dancing in women’s clothing). The distinction is, thus, between active and passive with “men” expected to penetrate (Murray et al., 1997; Pashang et al., 2018; see also Emadi, 2019). The male who penetrates is seen as a masculine normative male—and not as a man who has sex with a man—while those serving in the female-like role are stigmatized.

Since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, bacha bazi has garnered increased attention from Western media sources. These articles tend to sensationalize the practice, utilizing Western terminology (gay, homosexual, closeted, drag) and/or stigmatizing language (transvestite, pedophilia, sex slavery, depravity, pimp, trophy boys, boys of the Taliban) and presenting Islamic fundamentalism—particularly as it relates to the treatment of women (female seclusion)—as its primary cause. Besides demonstrating a lack of understanding around the practice’s cultural, socioeconomical, and historical contexts, this language is imbued with values. It recalls both colonial practices which pitted “barbaric” traditions against the “modern” West (and in the process challenged sexual diversity) and other post-9/11 narratives that have painted Muslim women as victims to justify interventions in the Middle East (see Oosterhoff and Sweetman, 2018; Young and Meyer, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Berry, 2003). These histories emphasize the importance of adopting a multifaceted, culture-centric approach that avoids conflating bacha bazi with Western notions of homosexuality and pedophilia [3].

Ecological model of violence

The ecological model is an excellent tool that offers nuanced insight into the complex interplay of factors responsible for violence. It was first applied in the 1970s to child abuse (Garbarino and Crouter, 1978) and has subsequently been utilized to understand the multifaceted nature of youth violence (Garbarino, 1985; Tolan and Guerra, 1994), intimate partner violence (Chauik and King, 1998; Heise, 1998), and HIV risk (Baral et al., 2013). The approach has also been adopted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and WHO in their violence prevention and intervention efforts. These applications emphasize the appropriateness of the framework for our context. The model explores the dynamics between four levels of factors (individual, relationship, social, and societal) that have the potential to increase a person’s risk of experiencing violence as a victim and/or perpetrator (Figure 1).

“Individual” refers to the personal factors that influence individual behavior, including personal history and biological and demographic factors. “Relationship” considers how proximal social relations—such as family, intimate partners, and social peers—increase risk. “Community” examines the contexts (neighborhood, school, workplace) in which these
relationships are embedded to “identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with being victims or perpetrators of violence” (WHO, 2002, p. 13). As we further illustrate in our analysis, factors like poverty and high unemployment make the opportunities for violence greater in certain communities. Finally, "societal" looks at the broader factors that reduce inhibitions against violence, including various cultural norms and social policies. Any substantive research on bacha bazi and the bacha bereesh population must appreciate how these various complex factors interact.

**Methodology**

This research conducts an integrative literature review using qualitative and quantitative secondary data irrespective of disciplinary perspective. In providing an inclusive heuristic to reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing representative literature on an emerging topic, the integrative literature review enables us to address and generate valuable new conceptualizations of our subject (Torraco, 2016). Additionally, it presents us with the flexibility to explore the many domains of social, cultural, political and economic life that influence sexuality-related matters. By adopting this approach, this work offers a timely and meaningful contribution to our knowledge of the modern variation of bacha bazi. Such understanding not only adds to the study of sexuality and gender in Asia, but is necessary to design and implement appropriate and effective intervention measures.

**Data sources and selection**

Data came from academic and grey literature. The latter was incorporated to account for the lack of data and academic literature on the subject. The types of grey literature used include conference proceedings, working papers, training manuals, and technical and research reports produced by non-profit organizations (NPOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), federal agencies, government oversight authorities, national human rights organizations, United Nations (UN) agencies, and research academies. Comprised within these documents were internal communications, survey data, field notes, policy statements, and fact sheets. Academic literature was sourced through Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, and the LSE Library Database, while grey literature was obtained.
through Google Scholar, the LSE Library Database, Refworld, and the reference lists of included papers. All works were identified using various combinations of the keywords: “bacha bazi,” “bacha,” “boy,” “halekon,” “male child*,” “male adolescent,” “boy play,” “beardless,” “danc*” “exploit*,” “abuse,” “assault,” “violence,” “labor,” “labour” “traffick*,” “prostitut*,” “sex*,” “sexual health,” “relation*,” “third gender,” “male-male,” “same-sex,” “homosexual*,” and “Afghanistan.” In total, 49 term pairings were employed to account for the wide variance in language utilized to discuss bacha bazi and the young males involved in the practice. **Table 1** (Corboz et al., 2020) contains a full list of these combinations.

The search considered full-text works published both online and in print between January 1990 and December 2019. In accordance with best practice guides, we developed a simple matrix to track which keywords and databases did and did not lead to relevant literature (Torraco, 2016). Keywords and keyword combinations were listed along the vertical axis of the matrix in alphabetical order while the databases used were listed along the horizontal axis. Duplicate records were removed, at which point a staged review was conducted to evaluate the unique works. This involved first screening records for relevance based on article titles and abstracts before assessing the main body of each remaining document for eligibility. In line with the stated purpose of our research, we developed the following selection criteria for inclusion: (a) published in English and (b) addressed bacha bazi, bacha bereesh, and/or male-male sexual activity in Afghanistan from 1990 to 2019. As we are interested in exploring our research questions within the context of bacha bazi’s recent revival and spread, we elected to begin our literature review in 1990—the first full year following the 1989 conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan War. This decision enabled us to examine the impact of both the aftermath of the war, as well as the rise, fall, and resurgence of the Taliban regime on these topics. At the conclusion of these steps, it was determined that 25 of the remaining articles fulfilled the criteria. Of these, eight were from academic literature and 17 from grey literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search keywords and combinations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>'bacha bazi'</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>'boy play'</strong> OR <strong>halekon</strong> OR <strong>'third gender'</strong> AND <strong>Afghanistan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>danc</strong> OR <strong>beardless</strong> AND <strong>boy</strong> AND <strong>Afghanistan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>bacha</strong> NOT <strong>posh</strong> AND <strong>Afghanistan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>male-male</strong> OR <strong>same-sex</strong> OR <strong>homosexual</strong>* AND <strong>exploit</strong> OR <strong>abuse</strong> OR <strong>violence</strong> OR <strong>traffick</strong> OR <strong>prostitut</strong> OR <strong>sex</strong> OR <strong>relation</strong>* AND <strong>Afghanistan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>male child</strong> OR <strong>male adolescent</strong> AND <strong>exploit</strong> OR <strong>abuse</strong> OR <strong>assault</strong> OR <strong>violence</strong> OR <strong>labour</strong> OR <strong>labour or trafficking</strong> OR <strong>sex</strong> OR <strong>sexual health</strong> AND <strong>Afghanistan</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** Bacha posh refers to a cultural phenomenon documented in parts of Afghanistan in which families without sons raise one of their daughters as a boy (see Corboz et al., 2020)
The most common reasons for exclusion were that records examined: (a) these topics prior to 1990, (b) the practice of *bacha bazi* in Pakistan (where it has also been documented), (c) female sexuality and gender identification within Afghan society, and/or (d) other forms of abuse and/or exploitation in Afghanistan, particularly targeting women and girls. Furthermore, works that referenced *bacha bazi*, *bacha bereesh*, and/or male-male sexual activity in Afghanistan solely in passing without providing further details were, ultimately, excluded. These works typically fell into two categories. One category centered around military ethics in complex conflicts, particularly security forces as moral decision-makers when faced with civilian violence, such as child abuse and/or exploitation. The second and smaller group offered policy guidance to process asylum claims from unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan. Finally, there was also a wave of literature focused on the childhood trauma and/or same-sex relationships of military personnel deployed in Afghanistan that was removed after the first stage of the review process.

**Analysis**

Selected works were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework. One advantage of this approach is that the coding and thematic analysis processes are guided by both theory (in this case, for instance, the ecological model) and empirical data. Furthermore, the framework is theoretically-flexible, meaning it can be used to answer questions relating to conceptualizations, experiences, perceptions, behaviors, and the factors underlying and/or influencing a particular phenomenon (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016). Consequently, it is particularly well-suited to research that explores questions across disciplines.

To ensure empirical relevancy, coding categories and subcategories (Step 2) were developed only after familiarization with the data (Step 1). In line with best practice guidelines, a second coding round was also conducted. This not only ensured that our codes were systematic, coherent, and robust, but aided the development of more latent codes (Braun et al., 2016). These codes were then organized into broad preliminary themes (Step 3), which were modified further in context of the research questions and theory, including to form subthemes (Step 4), before a final refinement (Step 5) and write up (Step 6) (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). As part of Step 4, we returned to the original data to determine whether our themes “fit” the data and coherently addressed our research questions (Braun et al., 2016). As recommended by Braun et al. (2016), Step 5 entailed writing theme definitions, which further clarified and refined the central organizing concept, scope, and boundaries of each theme. In total, 89 initial codes were identified in Steps 1 and 2. Upon completion of the six-phase process, these had been organized into five themes and nine subthemes (presented in Table 2). A number of the initial codes overlapped across more than one theme—a fact which highlights the cross-cutting and cumulative nature of the topics discussed.

**Considerations and limitations**

Credible data addressing both the practice of *bacha bazi* and the *bacha bereesh* demographic is difficult to acquire. *Bacha bazi* is illegal and stigma surrounds *bacha bereesh*. *Bacha baz*, however, are socially tolerated. While this paper will further explore the mechanisms and implications of this stigmatization and tolerance, it is important to highlight here that, as a result, secrecy surrounds the practice and communities often deny its occurrence. It has been well documented that illegality, perceived stigmatization, social tolerance, lack of awareness, and inadequate protective services all contribute to underreporting and vital data collection, especially in cases that involve (a) sexual violence or (b) the exploitation and/or abuse of children (UN Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2014). Challenges around obtaining accurate
accounts of male-male sexual activity in environments where “such sexual matters are deemed unreportable for moral or legal reasons” are salient (Dowsett, 1997, p. 76). Studies examining bacha bazi and male-male sexual practices in contemporary Afghan society have similarly noted these connections, highlighting their relevancy within this context.

Several of these sources referenced additional issues around gatekeeping when accessing bacha bereesh for key informant interviews, thus, illustrating the various situational components that can influence social desirability bias and lead to respondents underreporting or overreporting risk behaviors and sexual activities. Other interviewer effects (questionnaire delivery) can further impact reporting biases. Consequently, we recognize some aspects of our research may be underreported or not identified due to these source limitations. Grey literature was utilized in an effort to further identify relevant evidence. Grey literature may offer valuable contributions to a literature review—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8</td>
<td>Physical and psychological trauma</td>
<td>Health needs and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22</td>
<td>Risk factors for sexually transmitted infections (STIs)</td>
<td>Modern variation of bacha bazi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32</td>
<td>Lack of services and interventions</td>
<td>Sexuality and gender identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82,83</td>
<td>How bacha bereesh are introduced to bacha bazi</td>
<td>Risk factors for violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84,85,86,87</td>
<td>Activities involving bacha bereesh within the context of bacha bazi and the offenses these activities encourage</td>
<td>Socio-legal barriers</td>
</tr>
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<td>7,8,10,11,12,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,81,88</td>
<td>Difficulty defining the practice</td>
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<td>73,24,25,44,45,46</td>
<td>Stigma</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Motives for male-male sexual activity in Afghan society</td>
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<tr>
<td>21,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62</td>
<td>Culture of impunity</td>
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<td>2,16,17,20,21,22,26,28,34,39,50,63,64,65,66,67,68,69,70,71,89</td>
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<tr>
<td>59,76,77,78,79,80,89</td>
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Table 2. Themes, subthemes, and initial codes

Note(s): By this we mean that the practice is strictly defined as an expression of pedophilia, which as we have established is an inaccurate term to describe bacha bazi
particularly on current or emerging issues—including in the SRH space (Warner, 2019; see also Paez, 2017; Brown, 2018). That said, critical steps have been taken to evaluate the quality and reliability of the grey literature sourced, including identifying any positional slants (Brown, 2018). Lastly, our research and analysis are, once again, restricted to the situation prior to the events of 2021. As such, we believe this work not only offers a comprehensive and vital account of the practice before the Taliban regained power, but can serve as a basis for future inquiries on the topic. However, we recognize that some details may have changed. These limitations are not exhaustive and, ultimately, emphasize the need for further research in this area.

Findings and analysis
Twenty-five articles remained following our staged review. The vast majority of these (22 in total) were published in 2013 or later. Only three works had been published earlier, between the years of 2008–2010. None of the included academic literature was published prior to 2014. See Table 3 for details on these selected works. While multiple sources describe incidents as “widespread,” the scale of bacha bazi has been difficult to gauge—in part due to underreporting. The utilization of various methodologies, lack of disaggregate data, challenges conducting research in a conflict-affected country, gendering of sexual violence as female, and Afghan social customs proscribing the discussion of sex-related matters in general have all further inhibited the collection, comparison, and analysis of vital statistics that offer clear insight into bacha bazi’s prevalence (Frederick, 2010). Thus, it is challenging to state with certainty to what degree this prevalence is reflected in the frequency of publications on the topic.

However, publication frequency does appear to coincide with several events publicizing the practice amongst the international community (although determining the significance of these possible connections requires further scrutiny). These include the release of The Kite Runner film in 2007 (which references the practice), a 2009 statement by Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy at the 64th Session of the UN General Assembly condemning bacha bazi, a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary in 2010 entitled “The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan,” and a wave of media articles documenting the phenomenon printed between 2009 and 2017 (such as Abawi, 2009; Qobil, 2010; Nordland, 2011; Londono, 2012a, 2012b; Mondloch, 2013; Goldman, 2015; Constable, 2016). These articles contain several first-person accounts claiming that US troops have been instructed to disregard gross human rights abuses by American-backed Afghan security forces, including incidents of bacha bazi, for the sake of political stabilization (Sieff, 2012; Goldstein, 2015; Rosenberg, 2015; Chopra, 2017; Horton, 2017).

A 2015 New York Times piece by Goldstein on the topic prompted both the Afghan and American governments to take action with the latter’s House of Representatives requesting that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) conduct an inquiry into the accusations. The report resulting from that inquiry is one of the 15 selected works we analyzed that were published between the years of 2016–2019. According to Aronowitz (2016) and Schut and van Baarle (2017), these testimonials and those of other NATO military personnel stationed in Afghanistan who witnessed the practice have sparked more recent interest in the phenomenon—including demands for specific guidelines for soldiers on how to address such incidents. While these publications indicate growing awareness of the issue within the international community, the number of which still adopt a Western perspective illustrate the need for culturally-informed research that promotes not only greater understanding, but appropriate outreach, interventions, and services.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refworld</td>
<td>Grey lit. (INGO report)</td>
<td>Boys Sold for Sex in Afghan Province</td>
<td>Babak, Q</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scopus</td>
<td>Academic lit. (journal article)</td>
<td><em>Bacha Bazi</em>: cultural norms and violence against poor children in Afghanistan</td>
<td>Borile, S</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>International Review of Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference list</td>
<td>Grey lit. (INGO report)</td>
<td>Afghanistan: An In-depth Look at the Practice of <em>Bacha Bazi</em> (Dancing Boys)</td>
<td>CRIN</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>CRIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference list</td>
<td>Grey lit. (government agency report)</td>
<td>Trafficking in Persons Report: June 2018</td>
<td>DOS</td>
<td>2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>Academic lit. (peer-reviewed paper)</td>
<td>The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan</td>
<td>Echavez, C.R. <em>et al</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reference list</td>
<td>Grey lit. (non-profit organization report)</td>
<td>Training Manual on Child Labour in Afghanistan</td>
<td>Khan, S</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Naz Foundation International</td>
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</table>
Findings from these selected sources align with and have been supplemented by the vast literature analyzing similar research questions for young victims of violence, including sexual abuse and/or exploitation. The first parts of the following section use the synthesized data to clearly establish both *bacha bazi* in its modern variation and the *bacha bereesh* demographic. This foundation is essential before we can delve into the main themes and subthemes identified through our coding and analysis processes, specifically: (a) sexuality and gender identification, (b) stigma, (c) socio-legal barriers, (d) risk factors for violence, (e) physical and psychological trauma, (f) sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and (g) a lack of interventions and services. Ultimately, these steps offer a robust basis for our discussion.

### Bacha bazi in its modern form

After the Taliban was initially overthrown in 2001, *bacha bazi* experienced a revival with many reports claiming the practice is steadily growing. Historically linked to the Pashtuns, Afghanistan’s majority ethnic group, *bacha bazi* has, nonetheless, been documented in all provinces ([Saramad et al., 2014; Department of Labor [DOL], 2017; see also Aronowitz, 2016]). As discussed, there are numerous challenges to determining the extent of the phenomenon in contemporary Afghan society. The fact that each case differs and incorporates a multitude of acts further complicates matters. Table 4 demonstrates the full range of activities (and the associated offenses) reportedly linked with the practice. For clarity, consistency, and inclusiveness, this paper uses the term *bacha bazi* to refer to the entirety of these activities and “violence” to encompass all forms of violence cited below.
According to Khan et al.'s (2009) findings, many *bacha bereesh* were sexually initiated between 12 and 16 years old and reported receptive anal sex as the primary sexual practice. Hagar International reported that sexual abuse appeared to be an almost daily occurrence for the young males they interviewed, with many also being utilized for forced labor (Torsen, 2013). Of the *bacha bereesh* the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) spoke with, 87% stated they had not consented to their participation in *bacha bazi* and 81% said they wanted their involvement to end (Saramad et al., 2014). Violence, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation can take a variety of forms and several of these descriptions overlap or envelope others. We observed that terms like child sex trafficking, rape, sex slavery, prostitution, child abuse, and sexual exploitation are often used interchangeably to

<table>
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<tr>
<th>How <em>bacha bereesh</em> are introduced to <em>bacha bazi</em></th>
<th>Activities involving <em>bacha bereesh</em> within the construct of <em>bacha bazi</em></th>
<th>Offenses encompassed by the described activities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Sold by their families (to <em>bacha bazi</em> or procurer)</td>
<td>– Forced social entertainment (singing, dancing) (can include dressing in female clothing and/or wearing makeup; DVDs/videos of some of these performances are sold on the streets/posted online, which can lead to harassment and solicitations by strangers in public)</td>
<td>– Violence (including physical violence, psychological violence, intimate partner violence, violence against children)</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Temporary “adoption” by <em>bacha bazi</em> permitted by families in exchange for food, clothing, money etc.</td>
<td>– Rented out for male-only parties (can include forced sexual activity, such as anal and/or oral sex)</td>
<td>– Sexual violence (including sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape)</td>
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<td>– Abducted/kidnapped</td>
<td>– Exchanged to other adult males for favors</td>
<td>– Sexual exploitation (including transactional sex)</td>
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<td>– Lured with promises of vocational education and/or employment</td>
<td>– Prostitution (including “bidding wars” at parties)</td>
<td>– Solicitation of transactional sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Solicited in public places by <em>bacha bazi</em> or recruiter</td>
<td>– Pornography</td>
<td>– Child abuse (including educational neglect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>comprises coercion, threats, deception, intimidation, and enticements</em></td>
<td>– Given money and/or expensive gifts (including in exchange for their participation in sexual activities)</td>
<td>– Child sexual abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Beatings and/or threats of violence (against themselves and/or family)</td>
<td>– Child exploitation (including child labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Gang rape</td>
<td>– Child sexual exploitation (including commercial sexual exploitation of children, sale of children, child prostitution, child pornography)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Removed from their families to live with their <em>bacha bazi</em> or in other quarters (such as a house for <em>bacha bereesh</em>)</td>
<td>– Worst forms of child labor (including trafficking of children, forced labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Taught to dance, play an instrument, and/or sing</td>
<td>– Human trafficking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Removed and/or restricted from attending school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Required to do housework and/or other labor (cooking, shopkeeper, personal guard)</td>
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</table>

Table 4. *Bacha bazi* details
describe the practice. Addressing and preventing occurrences of violence, however, require understanding how each act is defined (UNHCR, 2001). Such imprecise language can, ultimately, inhibit and/or restrict access to care and services for those in need.

Furthermore, different contexts produce divergent understandings of and moral imperatives around violence. These, consequently, are continuously evolving. UNHCR, thus, recommends adopting a relativist (versus absolutist) approach when defining a behavior as exploitative and/or abusive within its cultural context. To do so, UNHCR (2001) suggests considering: (a) the particular culture’s socialization goals and (b) the way the child perceives his/her/their treatment. In Li et al.’s (2018) survey of 916 adolescents (aged 12–15 years) and 454 parents in six provinces in Afghanistan, nearly all adolescents (≥98.1%) and parents (≥96.3%) rejected bacha bazi. This aligns not only with other reports that state Afghan community members regard the practice as haram (“illicit”), or against the Sharia (traditional Islamic law derived from the religion’s precepts, in particular the Quran and the collection of the prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds known as the Hadith) (see Schut and van Baarle, 2017) [4], but also with interviews with bacha bereesh who perceive their treatment as abusive and/or exploitative. Other national and international bodies—such as the UN, UNICEF, AIHRC, US Department of State (DOS) and Afghan government—have similarly designated the practice as such. This paper, therefore, utilizes the words exploitation and abuse to describe specific acts within bacha bazi. It is, however, crucial to consciously and carefully make this choice, given the noted history of problematic Western narratives.

Bacha bereesh population
The wide documented age range of bacha bereesh and lack of global consensus around definitions further complicate not only data collection and word choice, but specifying and, ultimately, serving the affected population’s needs. Bacha bereesh ages 9–25 years old have been identified. AIHRC, for example, found that 42% of the bacha bereesh interviewed were between 13 and 15 years, 45% between 16 and 18 years, and 13% between 18 and 25 years (Saramad et al., 2014). Consequently, the bacha bereesh demographic falls within several defined age groups—specifically, children (0–18 years), adolescents (10–19 years), youth (15–24 years), and young people (10–24 years) (see WHO, 2014). Additionally, an individual’s involvement with the practice may span several of these age brackets. In Khan et al. (2009) and Saramad et al. (2014), the majority of bacha bereesh ages 18+ interviewed had initially become involved with the practice as children. Research by the DOL (2017), DOS (2017, 2018) and Hager International (Torsen, 2013) found, however, that shelters and support services for bacha bereesh older than 10 years old were particularly limited, resulting in victims being placed in juvenile rehabilitation centers. The UN has reported that some of the young people in these facilities have been subject to torture and ill-treatment (DOL, 2017).

Sexuality and gender identification
According to Khan et al. (2009, p. 24), bacha bereesh appear to predominantly “grow up to follow a sexually active pattern as receptive males, self-identifying with their femininity and receptive role” as a “third gender” within a trinary gender system of man/woman/non-man. This feminization process resembles that of other third gender identities in South and Central Asia, including the kothi in India, the meti in Nepal, and the zenana in Pakistan. However, careful attention needs to be applied so as to avoid generalizations as not all bacha bereesh may self-identify as “not-men.” Furthermore, experiences of coerced sex at early ages have been linked to an individual’s reduced ability to regard their sexuality as something within their control (Krug, 2002). Ultimately, sexual behavior does not exist in isolation and there is a diversity of contexts in which males pursue sex with other males (see Dowsett, 1997). Khan
et al. (2009), Aronowitz (2016), and Emadi (2019) note several of these contextual factors in Afghanistan, including poverty, high costs of marriage, sexual frustration, peer pressure, desire/attraction, lack of law enforcement, inaccessibility of women, and easier access to young males.

**Stigma**

Afghan culture is shame-based with masculinity and social membership both deeply tied to notions of honor, or ghairat. Family and the tribe are the most important institutions. Failure to fulfill one’s responsibilities or roles as designated by socio-culturally constructed ideas of manhood can result in a man being labeled be ghairat, or dishonorable, and excluded from the community (Echavez et al., 2016). Sexual relations in Afghanistan can be understood as relations of power with a male penetrator’s same-sex activity denoting hyper-masculinity (see Dunne, 1998). Shame and dishonor are, therefore, attached only to bacha bereesh serving in the female-like role, while bacha baz are socially tolerated. The “ownership” of bacha bereesh may be seen as a sign of prestige, wealth, and mardangi (“male power”) within certain circles. In environments where bacha bazi is considered haram, Khan (2008) links this tolerance to Islamic law requiring eyewitnesses to convict a person of certain moral “crimes.” As long as the perpetrator, thus, “conforms to an honored role within the community (i.e. being a husband or father)” and the illicit activities are invisibilized, such acts may be accepted by society (Khan, 2008, p. 28).

This culture of shame and the stigma attached to being anally-penetrated may not only fuel underreporting, but prevent bacha bereesh and their families from seeking assistance (European Asylum Support Office [EASO], 2017, 2018; Pashang et al., 2018). According to Slugget (2003), evidence suggests that youth sexual abuse is regarded primarily as an offense against the honor of the survivor’s family rather than as an act of violence directed at an individual. An exploration into the practice by the Child Rights International Network (CRIN) (2018) spoke with bacha bereesh who did not seek legal recourse for the crimes committed against them due to fears of discrimination, retaliation, and honor killings. These fears demonstrate how associating with stigmatized identities can have serious interpersonal and social ramifications. In the case of bacha bazi, ramifications can include ostracism, imprisonment, violence, and limited future prospects. Poverty, class, and education levels may further stigmatize bacha bereesh.

**Socio-legal barriers**

Policies aimed at addressing bacha bazi have been constrained by a number of socio-legal barriers, including legal pluralism, low state capacity, widespread corruption, political instability, and discriminatory attitudes towards sexuality-related matters and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons. The nation’s legal system comprises a mix of Sharia law, state legislation, and customary tribal law (primarily derived from the Pashtun community’s code of Pashtunwali) (Khan, 2015; Frederick, 2010; Aronowitz, 2016). Afghanistan’s Ministry of Justice estimates 90% of citizens rely on customary law due to a lack of “trust and confidence” in the country’s formal justice institutions, which have been marred by physical absence and low capacity (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2007). Saramad et al. (2014), Aronowitz (2016), Pashang et al. (2018), and Schut and van Baarle (2017) cite this lack of law enforcement as a key factor in the practice’s spread, while DOS (2018, p. 65) assesses “that most men who engage in bacha bazi paid bribes to, or had relationships with, law enforcement, prosecutors, or judges that effectively exempted them from prosecution.” The powerful and wealthy figures attached to the practice (some as bacha baz) span warlords, influential tribal leaders, local businessmen, and the Afghan National and Local Police.
While the Afghan penal code under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan does not contain explicit provisions regarding the criminality of consensual same-sex sexual conduct, it does criminalize adultery, pederasty, and violations of honor and does not prohibit harassment or discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation (Carroll and Itaborahy, 2015; DOS, 2017; Sida, 2014). Moreover, Article 130 of the Afghan Constitution “allows recourse to be made to Sharia law,” under which male-male sexual behavior is technically punishable by death—although as of 2020 no such death sentences had been reported since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan (Carroll and Itaborahy, 2015). Members of the LGBTQI+ community in Afghanistan have, however, reported facing assault, rape, arrest, and discrimination, including the denial of access to health services (Home Office, 2017; EASO, 2018; Emadi, 2019). Organizations devoted to protecting LGBTQI+ rights cannot legally register with the government and largely operate underground (DOS, 2017; Home Office, 2017). LGBTQI+ social networks were disbanded under the Taliban regime and have yet to rebuild to pre-Taliban levels (Khan et al., 2009). Under Taliban rule, males who had sex with other males were known to be imprisoned, whipped, and executed. According to Khan et al. (2009) the fear fueled by these reports have been “exacerbated by the recent resurgence of the Taliban in the eastern and southern regions of the country.” Moreover, identifying as a third gender is not a legally recognized gender status within Afghanistan (EASO, 2017, 2018).

Until 2018, Afghanistan’s penal code prohibited only some elements of bacha bazi, specifically sodomy, child kidnapping, adultery, and pederasty. The term was not explicitly included or defined within the law, inhibiting not only law enforcement, but the compilation of crucial data. This changed in January 2018 when Afghanistan’s revised penal code came into effect. It contains ten articles criminalizing bacha bazi and other acts associated with the practice, including attending bacha bazi performances and bacha bazi by the Afghan National Security Forces (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018). While officials hope the law will help protect bacha bereesh by more clearly distinguishing between perpetrators and victims (DOL, 2017), the revised penal code has compounded fears around punishment for disclosing prohibited sexual practices. These fears have been further fueled by reports that when seeking assistance, male survivors of human trafficking, including bacha bereesh, are frequently punished and/or detained rather than referred to victim support services (DOS, 2018; Frederick, 2010).

**Risk factors for violence**

Saramad et al. (2014) found that 58% of bacha bereesh interviewed had experienced violence, with beatings, confinement, and threats of death being the most common forms referenced. Certain political, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstances can increase an individual’s vulnerability to violence, including exploitation and/or abuse. Table 5 outlines a number of such factors that are particularly relevant to the bacha bereesh population and situation in Afghanistan. Violent conflict and cultures of violence have been noted to increase almost all forms of violence, including sexual violence (see Krug, 2002; Sanday, 1981; Gartner, 1990; Briggs and Cutright, 1994). In Li et al.’s (2018) survey, 71.2% of Afghan adolescents endorsed a husband hitting his wife, 79.7% parents hitting daughters, 83.6% parents hitting sons, and 70.3% corporal punishment in schools. Another study by O’Leary et al. (2018) with children from three geographic regions in Afghanistan revealed 71.1% of children were subjected to domestic violence, while some sources describe corporal punishment as routine (EASO, 2017; Ahmadi and Stanikzai, 2018).

Other structural components (poverty, unemployment, economic inequality, social inequality) can compound interpersonal violence and perpetuate power asymmetries (Galtung, 1969). These factors can, ultimately, place young adults at increased risk of sexual exploitation and violence, especially prostitution and trafficking. A number of sources indicate that bacha bereesh usually come from impoverished, uneducated backgrounds. For instance, AIHRC observed that 48% of bacha bereesh questioned were illiterate, while 86% of
bacha baz stated they did not let the bacha bereesh under their control attend school (Saramad et al., 2014). As risk and vulnerability are cumulative, one form of exploitation or abuse may heighten vulnerability to another (UNHCR, 2001). Sexual exploitation, for example, may increase an individual’s risk for recruitment into armed forces (UNHCR, 2001). Several incidents have been reported where the Taliban has recruited bacha bereesh to attack those (Afghan police, warlords) who had abused and/or exploited them (ILO, 2018; EASO, 2017). In other cited cases, poverty and the stigma associated with being a bacha bereesh have increased the likelihood of secondary trauma and revictimization, including blackmail, imprisonment, and violence (beatings, sexual assaults) at the hands of the authorities/police. Separated from family members (or family-like figures), bacha bereesh may lack vital physical protection and/or emotional and material support (see UNHCR, 2001).

There is a pervasive culture of silence and low awareness amongst families on child protection issues (for more on the latter see UNICEF, 2014). According to the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN), conversations with communities in 10 provinces revealed only 16% of people were likely to report witnessed child abuse (versus 48% would keep quiet/do nothing, 25% would comfort the child, 9% would confront the perpetrator, and 2% other) (Sayara Research, 2017). Khan (2008, p. 17) further noted a “strong reluctance to acknowledge and raise the topic” of child sexual abuse amongst teachers and parents (see also Slugget, 2003). Most concerning, in Li et al.’s (2018, p. 1692) study, about 20% of adolescents and parents stated that “it would be appropriate for an adult to threaten a young person if he or she reports experiencing or witnessing . . . [harmful traditional] practices,” including bacha bazi. These findings emphasize the necessity of incorporating a culture-centric approach in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Risk factors for violence based on the ecological model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Gender, age, and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Victim of child abuse or neglect</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Unemployment</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Illiteracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Non-enrollment in school</td>
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<td>— Non-enrollment in school</td>
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<td>— Mental health/behavioral problems</td>
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not only our discussion of *bacha bazi*, but policies and interventions aimed at addressing the practice’s underlying causes and the unique health needs of *bacha bereesh*.

**Physical and psychological trauma**

According to Saramad *et al.* (2014), the violence *bacha bereesh* experience, including sexual violence, can extend over multiple years. Such violence can result in significant physical and psychological trauma. In *bacha bazi* cases, documented physical trauma include: rectal bleeding, internal bleeding, anal fissures, hemorrhoids, sphincter incontinence, rectal prolapse, enterocoele, displaced pelvis bones, throat injuries, burns, broken teeth, bone fractures/breaks, and other genital injuries. While some of these injuries may stem from the actual acts of sexual violence, secondary physical damage (rough treatment, reprimanding) also occurs (see Erdogdu *et al.*, 2016). A multitude of factors can limit timely treatment for these injuries, including shame, stigma, illegality, and restrictions placed by *bacha baz*. Poverty and poor public health infrastructure within the country can further impede access to crucial health services for the affected population before, during, and after their involvement in *bacha bazi*. This lack of access may compound and contribute to the long-term health consequences of physical trauma, such as gastrointestinal disorders (irritable bowel syndrome, chronic abdominal pain, non-ulcer dyspepsia) (WHO, 2003).

Sexual violence has been associated with a number of psychological consequences, including anxiety, anger, guilt, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks, eating disorders, sleep disturbances, somatic complaints, poor self-esteem, social problems, withdrawal from relationships, inappropriate sexualized behaviors, and self-harm (self-inflicted injuries, substance use and abuse, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts) (Krug, 2002; Oosterhoff and Sweetman, 2018; O’Leary *et al.*, 2018; Briggs and Joyce, 1997; Cheasty *et al.*, 1998; Darves-Bornoz, 1997; Fergusson *et al.*, 1996; Levitan *et al.*, 1998; Anteghini *et al.*, 2001; Hedtke *et al.*, 2008; Cecchet and Thoburn, 2014). Amongst the *bacha bereesh* Dr. Raheen has treated, almost all have been affected by “depression, anxiety, nightmares, paranoia and other similar problems” (Babak, 2017). Studies of adolescent males have also found associations between being a victim of rape and violent behavior, stealing, substance abuse, and absenteeism from school (Krug, 2002). Other studies have determined prior sexual abuse to be a leading factor in predicting suicidal thoughts and attempts (Krug, 2002; Anteghini *et al.*, 2001). These mental health and behavioral issues can extend into adulthood and further stigmatize survivors. In Afghanistan, for example, mental health issues can be regarded as the consequence of committing an “offense against God” (EASO, 2018, p. 59; Slugget, 2003).

These issues can be compounded by the social consequences of violence, including ostracism by family and/or the community. The public elements of *bacha bazi* (parties/dance performances, DVDs of performances sold on streets, videos of performances posted online), can inflate risks of recognition in public and, consequently, social isolation and marginalization. Such risks can persist throughout and after a *bacha bereesh*’s involvement in the practice and increase their vulnerability to other acts of violence. Ultimately, the stigma can severely impact future job and marriage prospects. Khan *et al.* (2009) noted that many of the *bacha bereesh* interviewed continued performing, participated in transactional sex and/or prostitution, and/or became involved with the practice as an abuser (as *bacha baz*, *bacha bereesh* recruiters, traffickers, *bacha bazi* instructors). This aligns with other observations by Borile (2019), EASO (2017), Jones (2015), Londono (2012a, b), Abawi (2009), Schut and van Baarle (2017), Pashang *et al.* (2018), Aronowitz (2016), and Saramad *et al.* (2014)—the latter of whom emphasize the cyclical link between abuse and poverty within the context of *bacha bazi*. Drug and alcohol abuse have also been documented (Khan *et al.*, 2009; Saramad *et al.*, 2014; Jones (2015); EASO, 2017; Pashang *et al.*, 2018), as have instances in which the shame and stigma surrounding *bacha bereesh* have led to fatal suicidal behavior (Schut and van Baarle, 2017).
Sexually transmitted infections
While STIs have been noted amongst bacha bereesh, the exact prevalence is unknown (see Khan, 2008; Khan et al., 2009). Forced anal penetration can damage anal tissues, resulting in abrasions and cuts that facilitate the entry of viruses (hepatitis B, herpes simplex virus, HIV, and human papillomavirus) (Krug, 2002). In terms of HIV, various behavioral risk factors (multiple concurrent partnerships, low condom usage, prevalence of other STIs, age difference between partners, sex work, intravenous drug-use, men who have sex with men) and high-risk environments (poverty, conflict, high population mobility, high income inequality, poor/inequitable health systems) have been identified (Cherney, 2018; Barnett and Whiteside, 2002). A number of these overlap with bacha bereesh risk factors for violence identified via the ecological model (see Table 5). In addition, closed settings, such as the correctional facilities and police holding cells bacha bereesh may be confined to, are associated with elevated HIV-related risk (Kelly-Hanku et al., 2015). Although Afghanistan’s HIV prevalence is still low, Khan et al. (2009) have indicated the situation is a potential cause for concern and exhibits a number of risks that have contributed to HIV epidemics amongst similar demographic groups in neighboring countries (hijra in India).

A lack of interventions and services
In February 2011, following increased international attention focused on the practice, the Afghan government signed an agreement with the UN pledging to end bacha bazi. Since then, the government has undertaken various efforts to address the practice, including (a) government-run media campaigns (via radio, television, print) to raise awareness of human trafficking issues and (b) educational training programs on these topics (DOL, 2017; DOS, 2017). In 2017, for example, AIHRC conducted 60 such programs, reaching 2,091 Ministry of Defense (MOD) officials, university lecturers, mullahs, and civil society activists (DOS, 2017). Having ratified key international conventions concerning child labor, the Afghan government has also passed new laws and established institutional mechanisms to combat bacha bazi and child labor in its worst forms. These mechanisms include the National Strategy for Children at Risk, which has been tasked with creating a framework for providing social services to at-risk children and their families.

A major achievement of the strategy has been the establishment of CPAN. A coalition of government agencies, humanitarian and development actors, civil society organizations, law enforcement, social workers, child protection officers, health and education professionals, and community and religious leaders, CPAN receives and investigates complaints of child labor, violence, abuse, and exploitation and facilitates the referral of individuals to the appropriate social services. Originally established in 2003 in Kabul and Mazar-i-sharif, CPAN currently functions in 100 districts in 31 of the country’s 34 provinces (Sayara Research, 2017). While members vary from location to location, they normally include individuals from the Department of Education, Department of Justice, Office of General Attorney, Police Offices, Head of Rehabilitation Centers, local shuras (or councils), and Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs, and Disabled (MoLSAMB). UNICEF provides expertise and technical and financial support. Between 2012 and 2015, CPAN carried out 3,000+ community dialogues, contacting approximately 45,000 individuals (UNICEF, n.d.).

A 2016–2017 evaluation of the network, however, revealed several challenges facing CPAN members that prevented the coalition from fulfilling its objectives, including limited human and financial resources, geographic remoteness and insecurity, restricted inter-agency communication and commitment, constrained capacity of CPAN members, cultural sensitivities in communities to child abuse, and the lack of services available to children at risk (Sayara Research, 2017). A number of these have similarly been cited by Frederick (2010) and Slugget (2003) as factors limiting the provision of important services for child survivors.
of human trafficking and sexual abuse within the country. The evaluation also noted what appeared to be a selective response to child protection issues as CPAN members admitted to failing to address or record issues they felt unequipped to handle, including incidents of *bacha bazi* (Sayara Research, 2017). These actions have consequently restricted the ability of UNICEF and MoLSAMB to effectively track and respond to practice trends.

Ultimately, UNICEF’s conversations with communities in ten provinces showed 97.5% of respondents in nine provinces thought more child protection services were necessary (in the 10th province, Kabul, 72.9% shared this opinion) (Sayara Research, 2017). Delving further into the data, we confirmed not only limited reporting mechanisms to disclose incidents of abuse, but a lack of rehabilitation, referral and reintegration services, including safe shelters (Frederick, 2010). The shelters that do exist are primarily located in urban areas and/or geared towards female victims. According to EASO (2017), there is only one short-term shelter in Kabul for male trafficking victims. Torsen (2013) theorizes that security risks (due to the involvement of powerful individuals) are one reason more organizations do not offer services to trafficked male youth. This scarcity often results in victims being placed in juvenile detention centers or orphanages, which reportedly lack adequate food, healthcare, education, and psychiatric services (DOS, 2017). Drop-in and referral services are similarly largely restricted to Kabul and target aid to survivors of trafficking in general (Frederick, 2010).

As the Afghan government lacks the resources and technical skills necessary to provide comprehensive rehabilitative care, NGOs—such as the Aschiana Foundation and the Social Voluntary Foundation (SVF)—provide the majority of assistance (Frederick, 2010; Slugget, 2003). Both Aschiana and SVF offer a variety of drop-in services, vocational training, and home-based and center-based education programs. SVF also conducts psychosocial counselling and mobilizes “family visitors” who discuss with parents in home environments topics relating to children’s rights (Slugget, 2003). Other notable actors involved in these topics are the Male Sexual Health Working Group—formed to assist the Ministry of Public Health’s national AIDS prevention measures—and the Civil Society Against the Sexual Abuse of Children in Afghanistan advocacy group, which targets parliamentarians, such as those within the Ministry of Education (see Frederick, 2010).

**Discussion**

Synthesizing the evidence on *bacha bazi*, we appreciate the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary, culture-centric approach to the topic. We cannot begin to understand the practice and its impact (including the unique needs of the *bacha bereesh* population) without first considering the context in which it has emerged. We, thus, began our research by exploring the historical origins of *bacha bazi*, the current situation in Afghanistan, and how gender and sexuality intersect within Afghan culture. Using this as a backdrop, we see how a number of factors contributing to Afghanistan’s political instability, poverty, and inequality have fueled the practice’s revival and spread. This was further highlighted by our employment of an ecological perspective. Using this framework, we were able to identify a number of cumulative risk factors that make young males in Afghanistan particularly susceptible to violence, like *bacha bazi*.

Combining this analysis with insights from the literature on sexuality and masculinity within Afghan culture, we appreciate the ways masculine identities and sexual activities are constructed in relation to power structures and notions of honor (see also Lindisfarne, 1994). With Afghan power dynamics defining masculinity as penetrative, males who penetrate are seen as hypermasculine while males who are penetrated are seen as “not men” and stigmatized. This construction of male-male sexual behavior around gendered identities rather than sexual orientation has been documented in other South Asian countries, including India and Pakistan. And while it appears *bacha bereesh* predominately self-identify as a third gender within this
trinary gender system, we recognize that further research on this topic is greatly needed. Ultimately, through these gendered frameworks, feminized young males (*bacha bereesh*) become sexually accessible, despite a cultural context that has a low tolerance of sex between “men” (*Khan et al.*, 2009; *Borile*, 2019). Furthermore, the practice does not threaten important social values around female virginity and family honor (*Khan*, 2008; *Aronowitz*, 2016).

Throughout our research, we have observed how Afghanistan’s shame-based culture has shaped not only perceptions of the *bacha bereesh* population, but attitudes to and policies on LGBTQI+ and sexuality-related matters in general. Specifically, it has reinforced denial of the practice and invisibilized gender variance and male-male sexual activity (*Khan et al.*, 2009; *Khan*, 2008). Such silence contributes to the lack of knowledge and expertise around the complexity and diversity of male-male sexual behaviors, practices, and identities within Afghan society, particularly as it relates to *bacha bazi*. This dearth, in turn, limits our capacity to effectively articulate, analyze, and address *bacha bereesh* health trends and needs. Moreover, it has perpetuated inappropriate (often sensationalized) depictions of the practice by Western sources. We will expand upon the consequences of this tendency in our discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of our research.

In light of these gaps, we have drawn evidence from the scientific literature firmly linking violence and sexual abuse/exploitation to poor health outcomes. In doing so, we have been able to offer a substantive exploration of the range of health needs experienced by *bacha bereesh*, including physical and psychological trauma, mental health and behavioral issues, and STIs. Our analysis revealed, however, that there is a serious absence of appropriate services. The variance of activities documented within *bacha bazi* and the wide age range of *bacha bereesh* make it especially challenging to design and implement effective, inclusive interventions. These actions have been further impeded by a number of socio-legal barriers, such as: fear, discrimination, stigmatization, silence, corruption, legal pluralism, political instability, the persecution of victims, and a lack of awareness, accurate information, and readily accessible LGBTQI+-friendly resources. These factors paired with the unequal power dynamics between *bacha baz* and *bacha bereesh* have not only perpetuated an air of impunity for perpetrators, but fueled a distrust in authorities and the unwillingness to self-identify as *bacha bereesh*.

Theoretical and practical implications
Language can censor gender and sexual diversity and complexity, especially if the systems of power and inequalities differ from the social settings in which such language was coined (*Oosterhoff and Sweetman*, 2018; *Young and Meyer*, 2005; see also *Mulé*, 2018). Contextualized by a specific history, geography, language, and culture (*Oosterhoff and Sweetman*, 2018; *Young and Meyer*, 2005; *Corréa et al.*, 2008), Western categorizations like homosexuality are, thus, unsuitable considering Afghan conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, utilizing such terminology can undermine local self-determined identities and obscure social dimensions of sexuality and elements of sexual behavior that are critical to understanding the unique health needs of Afghanistan’s *bacha bereesh* population (*Young and Meyer*, 2005). While several studies have previously documented the issues with applying gender binarism to third gender communities in Central and South Asia (*hijra* in India), this topic is under-researched and little understood within the framework of *bacha bazi*.

Within the context of HIV prevention, other works have noted that categories, including men who have sex with men (MSM), alienate those who do not identify with such labels (*Khan*, 2008; *Muñoz-Laboy*, 2004; *Baer*, 2003). And while LGBTQI+ terms and identities can create opportunities for dialogue, recognition, and protection from international (particularly Western) Allies, they can also increase risks of ostracism and violence for diverse sexual orientation and gender identities in environments where their security and wellbeing are not guaranteed (*Oosterhoff and Sweetman*, 2018; *Young and Meyer*, 2005). It is, therefore, critical...
to recognize these limitations and utilize local terms which articulate these different histories, power structures, and social hierarchies whenever possible. In challenging the usage of Western binary constructs in the study of *bacha bazi*, this paper strives to set the tone for how to thoughtfully engage with the subject while simultaneously preserving Afghan socio-cultural understandings of sexual practices. Without maintaining this knowledge, we will lose nuanced contextualization of male-male sexual activity in Afghanistan, including how such activity relates to gender identities, orientations, partner choice, perceived sexual needs, pleasure, and desire. Moreover, it is critical for any interventions aimed at *bacha bereesh* to provide inclusive support for a range of sexual orientations and genders.

In shaping how particular practices are conceptualized, language also impacts health outcomes. For example, the designation of homosexuality as illegal may lead to low rates of HIV/AIDS testing and treatment due to fears around imprisonment and/or discrimination. Such fears may similarly dissuade individuals from notifying their partners of a STI or HIV infection, as noted by Khan et al. (2009). Translating concepts like child abuse into different languages and cultural contexts can introduce additional challenges, which can be further compounded by the inconsistent use of language. The gendering of sexual violence as female within this discourse can further constrain data collection, program design, legislation, and policy development. Thus, in summary, it is crucial to examine the naming and framing process (including who names and who is named), consider the judgments, assumptions, and risks surrounding various definitions, categories, and descriptions, and adopt and consistently utilize context-appropriate language (Oosterhoff and Sweetman, 2018; UNHCR, 2001).

Taking these steps is especially important when discussing taboo practices that involve children and adolescents and working with survivors of sexual violence. *Bacha bereesh* frequently experience stigmatization, discrimination, ostracism, violence, limited future prospects, and denial of access to vital health services. Consequently, careful attention needs to be given so as to avoid language or interventions that further stigmatize, victimize, and/or otherwise harm these individuals (see Greijer and Doek, 2016). Such is our moral responsibility. It is not, however, possible without a “a thorough understanding of local norms, customs and taboos to do with sexual behavior” (UNHCR, 2001, p. 42). In offering this insight, we hope to foster critically needed, culturally appropriate responses and important cross-sectoral collaboration moving forward.

Additionally, we must be aware that how we conceptualize and define a demographic influences the scope, focus, design, and marketing of the laws, policies, and programs meant to serve and empower them. While the majority of sources utilize “adolescent” and “children” to refer to the *bacha bereesh* population, this terminology can limit the protections and interventions offered to the *bacha bereesh* who fall outside these age groups. As key social transitions to adulthood are increasingly postponed until after biological maturation (which continues into the 20s), it has become clear that the crucial period of development which denotes adolescence has similarly extended into what was previously defined as adulthood (WHO, 2014; Sawyer et al., 2018). We, thus, recommend that when not using “*bacha bereesh*” to refer to the relevant population, the terms “young people” or “young male(s)” be employed as they are the most representative of the actual age demographic involved. This ensures the inclusion of victims between 19 and 25 years old who still have health needs and rights that differ from adults.

As the first study to apply the ecological model to the practice of *bacha bazi*, this research offers a significant contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon. With “sex, money, and power . . . close cousins” (Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 3), any program targeting *bacha bereesh* health outcomes must reflect on how these risk factors, including financial components and power asymmetries, relate to the group’s motivations, practices, and desires. Considering the cumulative nature of these factors, prompt intervention is critical. We, however, identified a lack of interventions that address immediate and long-term SRH needs, including treatment for physical and psychological trauma and reducing future vulnerability.
and risk. There are currently 0.01 mental health specialists for every 100,000 Afghans and child psychiatric services are largely non-existent (Malikyar, 2016). Grounded in our research, we advocate for the following culturally appropriate measures.

First, there is a clear need for comprehensive recovery efforts that meet the population’s immediate and long-term physiological, safety, and psychological needs. This spans counselling, legal services, healthcare, education, vocational training, family reintegration, safe living spaces, and individualized case planning. In line with Hagar International’s recommendations based off of interviews with male child survivors of trafficking, including bacha bereesh, such efforts should include a long-term residential-based recovery program located within an urban center (Torsen, 2013). This will be especially crucial for survivors unable to return to their families. In discussing the essentiality of family to recovery, these interviews emphasize the importance of family reintegration efforts. Moreover, they highlight how survivors can provide vital insight in program development and should be better incorporated in the design, monitoring, and evaluation processes (see also Frederick, 2010; Slugget, 2003). These measures should not be restricted to major cities, especially considering the lack of appropriate services in rural areas.

Second, our research reveals the necessity for community-wide preventative interventions that address the various risk factors for violence identified in the ecological model. These can take the form of SRH education programming, awareness training around male adolescent sexual exploitation and abuse for parents and teachers, and referral systems for appropriate and confidential medical, psychological, and psychosocial services. Other studies have noted the importance of family-focused and school-based interventions in mitigating violence (Miller and Jordans, 2016) and addressing child mental health in humanitarian and conflict environments—including within Afghanistan (O’Leary et al., 2018; Corboz et al., 2019; Panter-Brick et al., 2011; see also Frederick, 2010; Slugget, 2003). In addition to parents and teachers, prevention efforts will need to collaborate with key local actors, like community elders, religious leaders, and police. Not only do findings reveal that if abuse is reported it is most often shared with these groups, but a number of sources have identified the involvement of such individuals of standing as critical to addressing Afghan social and cultural norms around violence, masculinity, and honor. Mass media and social networks could be powerful platforms to engage in such discussions (Ahmadi and Stanikzai, 2018; Echavez et al., 2016), while corporal punishment in schools and HIV/AIDS intervention are two avenues through which issues relating to bacha bazi may be raised (Slugget, 2003; Sida, 2014).

It is paramount to adopt locally aware approaches. In the context of Afghanistan, this means measures must engage with and be informed by Islam—particularly as findings indicate that “a reliance on solely Western-based knowledge and models of child protection does not allow for the trust and credibility needed to intervene at a deep level [in Islamic communities], especially in regard to sensitive issues such as child sexual abuse” (Hutchinson et al., 2015, p. 405; see also Bragin et al., 2016). For instance, client-centered therapeutic methodologies have been observed to be less effective for Afghan children and their families due in part to the cultural sensitivities around discussing topics like sexual abuse (Slugget, 2003). Organizations have instead found success with methods that encourage play, recreation, social activities, and group discussions. We hope our research can continue contributing to the development of culturally appropriate mechanisms and processes that address not only the needs of bacha bereesh, but the variety of risk factors driving this practice’s revival.

Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research

Neither bacha bazi nor bacha bereesh fit neatly into any one internationally accepted definition. Consequently, neither do the identities, sexual practices, and health needs of the bacha bereesh community. In particular, this community faces complex challenges related to
violence, including physical and psychological trauma. A multitude of barriers, however, restrict the population’s access to vital care, including conflict, poverty, and stigma—three risk factors that also increase the group’s vulnerability from an ecological perspective. While Afghanistan has communicated a commitment to ending bacha bazi and taken several steps in this direction, the government is severely constrained by political instability, corruption, and poor state capacity. Limited accurate data and a lack of relevant academic literature further complicate any potential interventions. Adopting a multidisciplinary, culture-centric approach (demonstrated by our utilizations of the integrative literature review and ecological frameworks), we have begun to fill these critical gaps in knowledge.

In addition to providing a comprehensive view of bacha bazi’s modern variation, our research offers important practical and theoretical insights into how to develop appropriate health programming that ensures the physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being of bacha bereesh moving forward. This includes illustrating how the continued conflation of bacha bazi with Western notions of homosexuality threatens Afghanistan’s gender and sexual diversity and complexity. But further research is still greatly needed on a range of subjects, like gender construction, self-identification processes, male-male sexual practices, young male sexual networking, and SRH risk and needs within both the bacha bereesh population and Afghan society in general. For example, an exploration into how fluctuations in fear, insecurity, and hope amongst the bacha bereesh and LGBTQI+ communities in Afghanistan influence SRH outcomes and/or prevention measures could be interesting. The reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and deteriorating humanitarian situation inside the country stress the need for follow-up research that considers the implications of the regime change and worsening crisis—including as these relate to risks factors and vulnerability, barriers to accessing crucial care, and possible interventions. Since the Taliban has regained power, however, journalists, researchers, human rights activists, international organizations (including aid agencies), and others who have substantially contributed to recent accounts of bacha bazi have withdrawn from the country making it difficult to attain updated insights on the practice and the young males involved. Ultimately, we hope our work not only significantly supports, but sparks further research within the conceptual and empirical debate on sexuality, masculinity, and LGBTQI+ related matters in Asia.

Notes
1. Dari or Dari Persian (also known as Farsi) is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan as defined in the nation’s 1964 constitution—the other being Pashto, the native language of the Pashtuns. Used by approximately 50% of the population (although some estimates place this figure as high as 77%), Dari is the most widely spoken language in Afghanistan and serves as the country’s lingua franca [University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA, 2014); Central Intelligence Agency (CIA, 2020)].

2. Urdu is a standardized register of the Hindustani language (the other being Hindi) that emerged during the 18th century under the Mughal Empire’s rule (Basu, 2017). Primarily spoken in South Asia, particularly Pakistan and Northern India, Urdu has a rich literary history. This tradition includes poetic forms such as the ghazal, a type of amatory poem or ode (Platts, 1884; see also Faruqui and Pritchett, 1984).

3. The “sustained, focused, and intense pattern of sexual arousal . . . involving pre-pubertal children” (i.e. children 0–13 years old) (WHO, 2019), pedophilia is not an accurate term to describe bacha bazi, which involves young males over the age of 13.

4. Schut and van Baarle (2017) provide other indications that community members condemn the phenomenon, including modern Afghan songs like “Bacha Bazi” by Suhell and Umaira Sadiqzadah that alternatively describe the practice as a “nasty,” “bad,” and “disgusting” act.
5. According to UNHCR (2022), the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated since 2021 due to worsening droughts, intensified conflict, the Taliban takeover, and the withdrawal of international forces and aid organizations. These events have had a particularly significant impact on the population’s most vulnerable, including children, and have exacerbated other crises (displacement, acute hunger) facing the nation (UNHCR, 2022). For example, between January 1, 2021 and May 10, 2022, an estimated 823,539 persons have been newly displaced within the country due to conflict (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2022)). As of January 2022, over half of Afghanistan’s population—an estimated 23 million people—are in acute food insecurity, while 8.4 million are facing emergency level food insecurity (UNHCR, 2022).

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**Afghanistan’s bacha bereesh population**


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