

Tradition of Afghan girls who live as boys may be threatened

Analysis by Lisa Selin Davis

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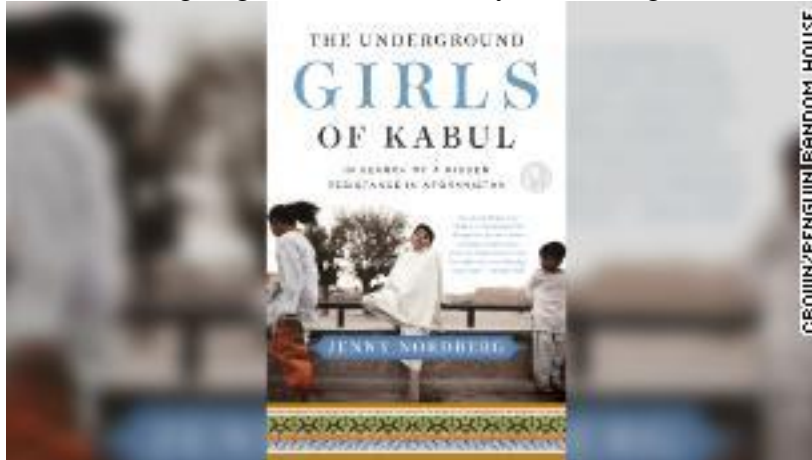
Ali, 14, wears jeans and a shirt while her sister Setar, 16, wears a traditional outfit for men, in Kabul, in a practice known as "bacha posh," in a picture taken in June 2017.

(*CNN*)The last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, after the Soviet--Afghan War of the 1980s, life for women and girls was ghastly.

As a [report](#) from the Congressional Research Service put it, "Taliban prohibited women from working, attending school after age 8, and appearing in public without a male blood relative and without wearing a burqa. Women accused of breaking these or other restrictions suffered severe corporal or capital punishment, often publicly."

Afghanistan routinely edges toward tops [lists of the worst places](#) in the world for women and girls, but some things had improved after the United States invaded in 2001. The [maternal mortality rate decreased](#) (though it is still alarmingly high). More women held jobs like doctors, politicians and journalists. And more [girls were educated: The World Bank showed](#) almost no girls receiving a primary education in 2000, but more than 85% going to school by 2012. Some even got to be on a [robotics team](#).

Even so, a 2018 UNICEF report said [1 in 3 Afghan girls](#) is married before age 18. Only 19% of girls under 15 are literate. And 60% of the 3.7 million children out of school that year were girls — for whom going to school has always been dangerous.



Jenny Nordberg documented the "bacha posh" in her book, "The Underground Girls of Kabul." For some girls, there has historically been a path to live, before puberty, as a boy. "Bacha posh," which in Dari means girl "dressed up as a boy," is an ancient tradition that pre-dates the Taliban in which a family designates a girl to live as a boy. That could either allow her a boy's freedoms — like education, athletics and the right to be outside alone — or impose a boy's duties on her, like working.

Some parents designate a bacha posh if the family has no sons, to alleviate what a family might consider its shame and vulnerability — not having a male child to protect the family or make money for it — with the hope that the shift will cause the next baby born to be a boy. The girls are expected to return at puberty, to become wives and mothers, whether they want to or not -- and many don't, according to Jenny Nordberg, author of a book about the bacha posh, "[The Underground Girls of Kabul](#)."



[They wanted a son so much they made their daughter live as a boy](#)

It is, argues Nordberg, a tradition rooted in inequality. Yet it is one of the only ways some girls get even a taste of freedom — a practice that will be much riskier, but at the same time perhaps even more relevant, she says, as we are already [seeing women facing discrimination](#) when the Taliban promised they wouldn't.

CNN asked Nordberg what may lie ahead for girls in Afghanistan, including the bacha posh. *This conversation has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*



Author Jenny Nordberg spoke about the bacha posh to CNN.

CNN: What was the situation for girls in Afghanistan before the United States invaded in 2001?

Jenny Nordberg: Most of them did not go to school. They were illiterate. There were some secret girls' schools, which basically meant a makeshift study group. Women or older sisters who may have had some education under the Russians would teach their younger sisters or younger children. They would say that they would teach the Quran, and then they would actually try to teach other stuff like math or language.



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A girl was a weakness to the family because she couldn't defend a family as a boy could. Growing up as a little girl meant that you were groomed for one thing only: to be married off to another family. And in order to be good marriage material, their movements were very limited. Little girls shouldn't play too much. They shouldn't be out much. They should definitely not read a book, not play sports, not be too loud. Be very demure, very, very quiet, always lowering their gaze. Even very liberal, educated, progressive parents didn't want their girls to be abducted by the Taliban or to face any danger. This was a way to protect them.

Once a girl begins to menstruate, when she can conceive and get pregnant, she is married off and becomes the property no longer of her father but of the husband. And this could be a man whom she hasn't met or whom she has only met once and never spoken to.

CNN: How had things changed in the 20 years that Americans were in Afghanistan?

Nordberg: There has been a new mostly urban generation, in big city centers like Kabul, a whole generation who went to school and university. They had big plans for themselves, both men and women. They have smartphones. They know what's going on in the rest of the world. These are the ones who, in the fantasy of a new functioning democracy of Afghanistan, were going to take over the state and push the country forward.

Americans were trying to cultivate the most ambitious, the most talented, the most spirited people to run their own country. Which is sort of like a colonialist fantasy.

CNN: The Taliban have said that they will protect women's rights "within the limits of Islam." Does that give you hope?

Nordberg: That statement means nothing because that will be subject to interpretation. There is zero correlation between what we think are reasonable rights for women, and what they think are reasonable rights for women. Oppressing women is not some side story. It's the main story. It's part of the recruitment strategy. Women are only useful for having children. And women need to be controlled and kept very, very small, very diminished.



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A woman who gets an education gets a lot of ideas. Maybe she wants to make some of her own decisions about her own body or whether or when she should have children, whether she should get married. They want none of that. They want to hold all the power over women.

Look at the last few days. Why would people be so desperate to get out if they believed the Taliban were a softer version of themselves? Why would women go into hiding, scared for their lives, if they thought that there was any chance that there was some kind of negotiation or a conversation with the Taliban about human rights for women? Short of another invasion, who is going to hold them to that? The Taliban have now taken over in such a swift and brutal and devastating way. They have no reason to compromise. Why would they want to compromise on anything?

Their credibility, in my view, is zero for actually granting women and girls basic human rights.

CNN: What's going to happen to the women who have been educated and were promised a better future?

Nordberg: Women who are useful in one way or another will be allowed to keep working, but they will have no rights of their own. A female surgeon is under the spell of her husband or her father. And she will need to obey a Taliban society and Taliban rules. They'll parade around some women for a few weeks to say, "Oh, look, we're completely fine and normal. We got this. Don't worry." And then when the eyes of the world have moved away, they'll crack down hard. But they'll keep a few token women to show off as public figures. The rest will be completely brutalized. (As [CNN recently reported](#), "As Taliban leaders tell international media they 'don't want women to be victimized,' a more sinister reality is unfolding on the ground. Girls are being forced into marriage, female bank workers marched from their jobs, and activists' homes raided in a clear message that the freedoms of the last 20 years are coming to an end.")

CNN: Who are the bacha posh?

Nordberg: A bacha posh is a girl who lives as a boy, almost like a third gender. In order to reach for what we think of as some very basic human rights, a girl can put on a pair of pants and a shirt and cut her hair off and pass as a boy. This will increase her range of movement. She doesn't need to be kept indoors. She could play sports. She could escort her mother or do errands. She'll see more of the world outside the house, essentially. And in areas where education is only afforded to boys, she could get an education and could also safely get to school, if it's dangerous for a girl to travel or to walk to school.

It's an ancient tradition and custom that is a sign basically of a deeply dysfunctional, segregated society where women and girls are second-class citizens. If girls had rights, there would be no need to pretend to be the more privileged gender. This is a society where boys and men have almost all the rights. In an extremely segregated society, there will always be those who try to get over to the other side.

CNN: Why do some girls become bacha posh?

Nordberg: It can be done for a number of reasons. If the family doesn't have a boy, it is not just perceived as weak but is actually weak, because there will be no one to defend the family and support aging parents. It could be that people know that you have a bacha posh instead of an actual son, but it's still considered better than to have just daughters. It's viewed favorably by most Afghans.

It could also be that if the family is poor, you will have a bacha posh as labor, working for the family business or working outside the home as a shop assistant, bringing some money in if the father can't work or if the mother is widowed.



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It could also be that the parents really want a girl to get an education. If you have two sons and a daughter and then you dress the girl just like the boys, and you send all three of them to school.

CNN: Is it liberating for the girls who are living as bacha posh?

Nordberg: It depends. Is it a burden? Is it so that you can work and bring home money to the family? Or is it a privilege where you're afforded an education or some freedom of movement or you can ride a bike or travel with your father? It can be either or it can be both. It's very complicated psychologically for each individual bacha posh. And it mostly depends on two factors. What was the reason for your being a bacha posh, and how long did it go on for?

CNN: Will it still be allowed under Taliban rule?

Nordberg: This existed in Afghanistan long, long before the Taliban came to power, and it will exist until the day women have their own human rights. That said, there will be a greater need to hide, a greater need to disguise yourself if you want to do certain things. But it will also be more dangerous to do it, because I believe the Taliban do not approve of this. It was always risky and it will be more dangerous under a harsher regime. It will be making a mockery of the Taliban and their view on women.

CNN: What are our moral obligations to the girls and women of Afghanistan?

Nordberg: I hesitate to even use the term "moral obligation." Can we even talk about that anymore? In my opinion, we just needed to get as many people as possible out. What was done wasn't enough, by far. Every ambassador, any country that was involved in this failure of a generation, should have issued emergency visas and opened their borders to the people who we have put in incredible danger by promoting and cultivating and encouraging and educating them. These are our people. and we are part of that country now, as they are part of us.

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We encouraged these women to get an education, get a profession, choose your own path, become more like us, build your own country. And those are the ones who are now in extreme danger. These are the journalists, academics, teachers, university students, artists, politicians. The airlifts are now over, but other, more underground efforts, will continue. Get them out and get them out now because the gate is closing on something that will be a horrible, horrible country for women for many years to come.

[Lisa Selin Davis](#) is the author of "[TOMBOY: The Surprising History and Future of Girls Who Dare to Be Different.](#)"

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