



ENDING BACHA BAZI

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WHAT IS BACHA BAZI?

For over two decades, War Child Canada has worked in conflict zones to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. Commonly known in Afghanistan but largely forgotten on the international stage, an age-old cultural tradition that targets young boys has made a quiet comeback. It's a practice called *bacha bazi*—or 'boy play' in English. Bacha bazi has been occurring for centuries and is, essentially, a widely practiced and tolerated form of child abuse.

In Afghan communities plagued by unpredictable conflict and severe poverty, children are at their most vulnerable. When families are scrambling to find enough to eat and keep a stable roof over their heads, boys are often forced to wander the streets to find work. Some men, often rich or influential, take advantage of this situation and coerce children to work as 'dancing boys' under their possession. This practice most commonly takes place at parties and weddings, where young boys are dressed up in feminine clothing and forced to dance for partygoers. But once the music has stopped, boys are often sexually abused by their possessors, who use their power to trap them within this cycle of abuse and recurring trauma. Cases of bacha bazi are rarely acknowledged or prosecuted, so children know that reporting the abuse may only worsen their already dire situation.

War Child Canada has been working tirelessly for the past 24 months to stop this practice and to seek justice for the young boys who have been abused.

OUR RESPONSE

War Child Canada's work is grounded in a strong commitment to justice. Justice is not merely an abstract goal on the horizon, but something that can be actively sought and achieved through effective programming.

War Child Canada has successfully developed a three-tiered approach to promote justice for Afghan women and girls affected by gender-based violence, and adapted this model to tackle bacha bazi. Through the provision of direct legal aid, community education, and legal system reform, the organization implemented a program designed to protect the rights of young, vulnerable boys.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Legal Reform

48%

Increase in understanding of laws by staff in the justice and law enforcement system

Criminalized

By working closely with the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Hajj, War Child Canada contributed to criminalizing bacha bazi

186

Cases of child sexual abuse cases were prosecuted over 24 months

100%

Of all of the perpetrators were arrested and charged



Community Awareness

22,000

People are now better equipped to advocate for children and seek justice for sexual abuse

Improved attitudes toward child rights

At Friday prayers, religious leaders discussed sexual abuse against children, advocated for empathy with the parents of survivors

89%

Of trained youth volunteers expressed they were able to create a significant positive change in their neighborhoods through grassroots campaigns

400% increase

In the number of cases of alleged bacha bazi or child trafficking referred to the Afghan Legal Aid office



Shifted Perspectives

Victims vs. shame

Parents don't view their boys as 'dirty' or deserving of shame —now viewed as victims of a terrible human rights abuse

4,425 parents and 1,670 school teachers

Have been trained to support and identify children who have faced bacha bazi

40

Active civil society organization members make up a policy advocacy network in Afghanistan to continue to improve child rights and child protections



Legal Aid and Legal System Reform

Without the support of the legal system, reported cases of bacha bazi were not taken seriously or brought to trial; the practice itself was not criminalized. This inactive system let perpetrators go unpunished and enabled them to continue cycles of abuse.

Before War Child Canada began its programming, many police officers, legal case workers, and justice actors were not willing to acknowledge the issue and did not try to discourage the practice from occurring. An equitable and sharp justice system was desperately needed to protect the rights of Afghan children.

War Child Canada organized training sessions that educated justice workers on the practice of bacha bazi, and centered this discussion around their own roles and responsibilities in advocating for children whose rights are abused. As a registered law firm in Afghanistan, War Child Canada also enhanced child protections against abuse by enforcing children's rights in the written law and providing legal aid to children affected.

"In our village there was a wedding party and there was a 14-year-old boy dancing. I became very disappointed and consulted about the sin of such acts with the Malak (Elder) of that village and asked him to protect in the future from allowing such a performance."

— Male Teacher

"Prior to this program, children were mistreated in our place. Children were forced to dance at wedding ceremonies and no one knew about their rights, but now as a result of this project the problem has decreased dramatically."

— Male Community Member



Community Education

NOOR'S STORY

While shopping for his family, 14-year-old Noor was abducted by a shopkeeper who assaulted him and then took him to a dance hall and forced him to dance for men. Embarrassed and ashamed, but with no one to turn to, Noor was told by the shopkeeper he had no choice but to stay with him and continue dancing for parties. Noor never returned home that day.

Months went by and Noor became a "regular" dancer at the all-male parties until a neighbour, who was part of War Child Canada's community protection teams, noticed Noor entering the dance hall. The neighbour reported the incident to War Child Canada who alerted local police. The police acted quickly, arresting the shopkeeper and party-goers.

Private attorneys trained by War Child Canada took Noor's case and the perpetrators were convicted. War Child Canada's team facilitated Noor's reintegration with his family who were overjoyed and expressed their sincere gratitude to War Child Canada for eliminating bacha bazi in their community.

Since bacha bazi is seen as 'the way it's always been' in Afghan culture, many people turn a blind eye to the practice or are simply not aware that it is an abuse of human rights.

In order to prevent this violence, War Child Canada encouraged discussion and education about the issue amongst community members. The organization worked with community members, school teachers, religious leaders, parents, and students to raise awareness about the issue and explain the rights that children hold in the legal system.

As teachers shared this information with students, religious leaders spread the message to their congregations, and students talked with parents and friends, word spread quickly. In a short period of time, these community programs have demonstrated tremendous success in shifting the public's perceptions of bacha bazi.



Moving towards a brighter future

War Child Canada knows that children who have been affected by bacha bazi require support to re-integrate smoothly into their homes and communities.

The organization's rehabilitation and counselling programs help affected children deal with their trauma and move forward with their lives. With supportive families and communities who want to see their children succeed, boys can return to a life where they can truly live as children.

Community members expressed that since War Child Canada began its work against bacha bazi, very few events feature a boy dancer. Community members and workers in the justice system recognize that bacha bazi is a practice that inflicts tremendous harm on young children and their families and must be stopped. As one beneficiary reported: "Now communities are asking War Child Canada to expand into neighbouring communities."

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

Youth Groups trained by War Child Canada organized street theatres, stage shows and dramas to disseminate messages relating to child protection, education and empowerment.

After one such event, a 44-year-old man, who did not know that bacha bazi was harmful and criminal, released three boys he was holding.

"Public awareness has increased about children's rights. They have received a lot of information on bacha bazi and there is positive feedback without any doubt."

— Religious Leader

By continuing to work alongside communities and advocate for children's rights, the possibility of ending the practice altogether may soon become a reality.