Son preference is prevalent in nearly all areas of the world but is most common in areas of the world with a strong patrilineal society (Puri, et. al.). In a book titled *The Underground Girls of Kabul* by Jenny Nordberg, Nordberg investigates son preference in Kabul by interviewing women and girls who were once raised as sons or once raised one of their daughters as a son. Nordberg defines the process of raising daughters as sons as *bacha posh*. Although Nordberg never plainly states that bacha posh affects these children mentally, it is evident that the process of changing from a girl to a boy has a wide range of consequences on gender identity, including both mental and physical consequences. In order to understand the effect of son preference on gender identity, it is important to first understand the definition of son preference, the difference in privilege between male and female children, and the long term effects of bacha posh that are apparent in Nordberg’s book, *The Underground Girls of Kabul*.

First and foremost, son preference is exactly what it sounds like: the preference of having male children instead of female children. According to Xioyi Jin, Shuzho Li, and Marcus W. Feldman in “Marriage Form and Son Preference in Rural China: An Investigation in Three Countries,” family systems that are mostly patrilineal are the main root of son preference. In a patriarchal society, sons are more commonly willing to provide physically demanding labor on family farms or in family businesses. Because they are more willing to do labor, they are more likely than daughters to “earn wages and support their family during old age” (Jin, et. al. 512). Additionally, in order to keep the family name going, having at least one son is essential. The more sons a family has, the higher the family’s social status (Nordberg). In some countries, only men are allowed to handle the funeral pyre of belated parents. When sons get married, they continue to live with their parents in order to take care of them, and their spouse provides additional help (Jin, et. al). The influences of son preferences also include communities of patriarchal societies. Jin, Li, and Feldmen write that “the power structure of the community favors men and having a son in the family provides a sense of security and higher social status, while families without a son are ridiculed by community members” (512). In an article titled, “There is Such a Thing as Too Many Daughters, but Not Too Many Sons,” by Sunita Puri, Vincanne Adams, Susan Ivey, and Robert D. Nachtigall several women are asked about son preference, and nearly all responses referred “to the concept of culture” (1170) first. Even women who protested the idea of son preference recognized that sons played a more culturally significant role (Puri, et. al.). It is made clear that daughters bring no benefit to families besides the fact that they can have sons in the future.

Son preference can lead to several discriminatory practices against daughters. One of the most common practices to ensure having sons is sex selection. Son preference leads to several second-trimester abortions and even at-home abortions. Second-trimester abortions and at-home/unsafe abortions are more than 80% more dangerous and risky than childbirth (Nkwabong, et. al.). Son preference also affects the way parents distribute food, money, and several other resources. This can result in a large female childhood mortality rate because of sickness and lack of food. A startling statistic found in Puri, Adams, Ivey, and Nachtigall’s article is that there have been over ten million “missing” women in India alone. The term “missing women” refers to the imbalanced sex ratio and small number of women compared to the expected number of women (South). The large amount of “missing” women is because of sex selection. Furthermore, sex selection is a form of violence against females. The pressure that is put on women to participate in sex selection is heavy. When women fail to provide a son for the family, she is seen as invaluable and infertile (Nordberg). It is incompetent to say that women who never give birth to a son but give birth to a daughter are seen as infertile because to be infertile, a woman cannot have ANY children.

In Nordberg’s *Underground Girls of Kabul,* the difference in privileges that female children have and male children have is demonstrated several times. The families in this book begin raising their daughters as sons for several different reasons. One of the reasons mentioned in the book is because mothers in Afghanistan believe that by raising one of their daughters as a bacha posh, it will make them more likely to give birth to a son in the future (Nordberg). A woman named Asma raised one of her daughters as a bacha posh, and then she gave birth to four sons. “No one can dispute the power of magic in bacha posh” (Nordberg 113). One of the most common reasons to raise a daughter as a son is because there have been no other sons born yet. A mother that was once a bacha posh says, “I wanted to show my youngest what life is like on the other side” (Nordberg 15). The fact that the mother referred to a son’s life as “the other side” shows how different the privilege level between male and female children is. A boy’s life in Afghanistan can include “flying a kite, running as fast as you can, laughing hysterically, jumping up and down because it feels good, climbing on trees to feel the thrill of hanging on” (Nordberg 15). A girl’s life does not contain any of the previous because they are the ones who stay in to do domestic work. Females are not allowed to talk to men, look people in the eye, speak up, or wear any garments that reveal their bodies. If girls or women do participate in any activity that is seen as a boy’s activity, it is frowned up because “A woman who attracts improper attention to herself is inevitably a *whore*” (Nordberg 27). Women are allowed to drive by law, but it is very frowned upon. In Nordberg’s book, there is an incident where a woman named Nader was taunted and threatened while she was driving. Another privilege that boys get is education (Nordberg). This ties into son preference because sons are responsible for taking care of their parents when they are old, which is why parents are more willing to invest in an education for them. By investing in an education, it ensures that the son will be making a decent amount of money in the future and can provide his elderly parents with a good quality life (Siah). There is evidence of this in Nordberg’s book; she writes, “Education for women can be detrimental for society, and ultimately the end of mankind” (187). Bacha posh means that little girls get to experience the other side*,* but unfortunately, they do not get to stay on the other side.

When the bacha posh children hit puberty, they are expected to change back (Nordberg). They are no longer allowed to identify as boys. They are not allowed to leave the house unless they are with a male. They are not allowed to look people in the eyes or voice their opinion. They are not allowed to play sports anymore, and they will never be able to drive a car without it being seen as a crime. They have to give up all of their freedoms. “No matter how athletic, boyish, and buoyant the spirit of a bacha posh may have been, puberty – or, according to Dr. Fareiba, ideally sometime before – is the time when the curtain necessarily comes down for most girls” (Nordberg 96). There is a case in the book about a young bacha posh, Sakina, who was thrown a party when she changed back into a girl. When asked if she was happy to change back, Sakina replies with, “The right word might be *confused*” (Nordberg 131). When bacha posh children change back into a girl, they have to relearn their entire existence including their speech, movements, and mobility outside of her home. This leads to the topic of gender identity and how son preference might be linked to gender identity issues for the female children that were once raised as males.

When female children are raised as boys, they experience significantly more freedom and privilege than their sisters and other girls, so it makes sense that they would not want to change back into girls. Unfortunately, in a culture as strict as Afghanistan’s, there is not much of a choice. Nadia Hashimi states in her article titled, “Afghan Girls Dressed as Boys, Recipe for Gender Dysphoria?,” that “Emotionally, the transition can be quite traumatic as it is essentially imposing an identity crisis on a young psyche” (par. 4). Often times, former bacha posh children despise the idea of getting married because they are most likely irritated with the “subservient role they have to assume” (Hashimi par. 4). Most of them wish to stay a boy, and there are a few who decline turning back into a girl. To analyze the effects that the practice of bacha posh has on girls, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, also known as the DSM, is used (Hashimi). Hashimi’s explanation of the DSM is “the guiding classification system that categorizes and lists criteria for the full spectrum of mental illness” (par. 5) Gender Dysphoria is when there is a significant difference between one’s expressed gender and one’s biological gender, and it continues for at least six months (Hashimi). Gender Dysphoria is very common among children that were raised as bacha posh. “This condition causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (qtd. in Hashimi par. 5). This can lead to a bigger problem in Afghanistan: an enormous gender gap. More and more women might want to be treated as the opposite sex because of all of the benefits being a male brings. Hashimi brings up a relevant and understandable point by asking, “Why be a girl when you could be so much more as a boy?” (par. 6). There are several examples of girls that resist the transition back into womanhood in Nordberg’s book. She writes, “A person’s *sex* is determined at birth, but *gender* is not. It is trained and adopted through performance” (176). One example of a bacha posh that identifies as a man is Shukria. Shukria explains that she does not feel like a woman. She tells Nordberg that it is difficult for her to lay in bed with a man because he is a man and she thinks that she is also a man. However, she is not attracted to women either. Another example of a bacha posh that refused the transition back into womanhood is Nader. Nader never married or had children. She wore small sports bras to minimize her chest, never plucked her eyebrows, let the hair on her upper lip grow, and tanned her skin to make it look more masculine (Nordberg). In contrast, some women in Afghanistan that were once bacha posh benefit from living as a son. This practice can cause a great quantity of issues, but it can also lead to a lot of benefits. Being raised as a son allows these girls to develop honor and self-confidence. An example in *The Underground Girls of Kabul* is Azita. Azita was once raised as a bacha posh, and in adulthood, she got to be a part of parliament. She says, “It’s only important to be a bacha posh in the head, to know you can do anything” (qtd. in Nordberg 136). However, regardless of the women who benefit from being raised as a bacha posh, there are still countless women and girls that struggle with their gender identity because of it.

Jenny Nordberg’s book titled *The Underground Girls of Kabul* spells out several different experiences of bacha posh. The main reason behind bacha posh is son preference. Families are choosing to raise their daughters as sons because the benefits of having a son far outweigh the burdens of having a girl. Bacha posh allows female children to experience the privileges and freedoms that a boy gets to experience. After being on “the other side,” why would any bacha posh want to transition back into being a girl or woman? Because of this, son preference can be directly linked to gender identity issues in the future. By comprehending what son preference is, analyzing the large differences in privilege between males and females in Afghanistan, and looking at the long term effects of bacha posh, it is evident that son preference has effect on gender identity. Bacha posh can be seen as either a benefit or a detriment depending on who you ask and what experiences they have had.

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