



Social Acceptance of Folk Artists: Conceptualizing Hegemonic Masculinity in the Pashtun Culture

**JHSS
39-55**

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Vol. 30 (2), 2022

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Abstract

This study showcases the prevailing Pashtun norms in society regarding the social acceptance of Pashtun folk artists. It also examines the pressure of social hegemonic masculinity on Pashtun folk artists' personal and professional lives. The research approach was qualitative, in which ten professional folk musicians, specifically drummers (called tabla nawaz in Urdu), were selected through purposive sampling from Islamabad Bazar (commonly known as Chitrali Bazar) and Kabari Bazar in Peshawar city. Connell's (1995) framework on masculinity is used to analyze Pashtun's hegemonic masculinity and its influence on folk artists. The study findings indicate that in contemporary Pashtun society, folk art and artists are discouraged on both theoretical and practical levels. Theoretical discouragement manifests in the lack of granting them their deserved cultural position, while practical discouragement is evident in the absence of protection for their rights as artists. The rise of radicalization and conservative interpretations of the Pashtunwali has restricted the presence of folk artists in public. Consequently, folk artists, in general, and folk musicians and instrumentalists were ridiculed, alienated, and subjected to derogatory language because their profession was perceived as effeminate. These attitudes caused a decline in the number of musicians, which led to the loss of the positive influence of art in society. It was concluded that societal views place the category of tabla nawaz at the lowest hierarchical level in both social stratification and levels of masculinity.

Keywords: folk artists, social acceptability, hegemonic masculinity, Pashtunwali

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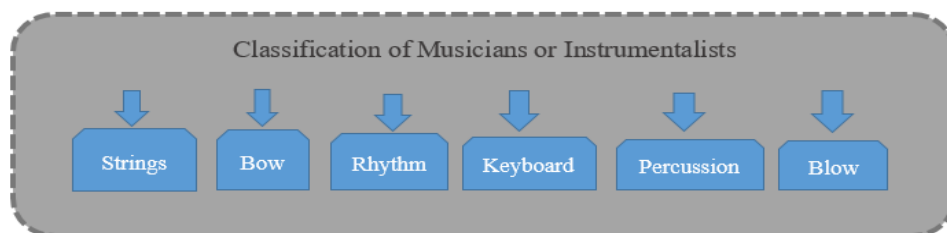
Introduction

The social acceptance of folk artists is a complex phenomenon in Pashtun society. It directly and indirectly impacts their personal lives, mental growth, and professional development as permanent members of Pashtun's³ ethnic identity. Farigh Bukhari, in his book "Sarhad Key Lok Geet" (Folk Songs of the Frontier), defines a folk artist as an "Olasi funkhar" who plays traditional Pakhtun music or sings folk songs. Pashtun's ethnic identity and pride are ingrained in their folklore and folk culture, which is referred to as "Olasi Adbiyat" or "Olasi Poha" in the Pashto language (Momand & Şahrai, 2006; Dinakhel & Ul Islam, 2019). A folk artist is defined as an individual who plays musical instruments or sings traditional songs to preserve the folklore of an ethnicity. As a broader category, folk artists can be further divided into sub-categories (Bukhari, 1987; Khattak, 2010; Enevoldsen, 2004; Nasiri, n.d).



The instrumentalists or musicians in it can be further classified into sub-categories (Yousaf, 1989).

³ Pakhtuns/Pukhtuns/Pukhtoons and Pashtuns are linguistic variants used for the same ethnicity. The difference in pronunciation of the "kh" and "sh" sounds is because of the two different dialects spoken in the northern and southern districts, respectively, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The current research prefers 'Pashtun' spellings.



Theoretically, this classification has no hierarchy; however, in Pashtun society, folk artists who play percussion instruments (drums) face social alienation compared to the rest of the categories. Consequently, exploring the social adjustment issues of folk artists who face social exclusion in the Pashtun society is crucial. Also, there needs to be more academic research on the impact and pressures of hegemonic masculinities on the personal and social lives of these folk artists. Therefore, for this study, the term ‘folk artists’ refers to male instrumentalists or musicians of Pashtun ethnicity who specialize in playing *tabla* or drums, a percussion instrument living in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Folk Artists and Pashtunwali

Pashtuns, also known as Pushtun, Pakhtun, or Pakhtun, are the same ethnic group primarily residing in Afghanistan and Pakistan (David, 2013). They are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising around forty-two percent of the population (Abdurahmonov, 2021). The Pashtun population in Pakistan is at least twice that of Pashtuns in Afghanistan (Belokrenitsky, 2022). Pashtunwali is an unwritten constitution of conventions and practices that is dually applicable in every sphere of life for both men and women. Its fundamental principles include *sharam* (honor), *gherat* (courage), *haya* (modesty), *melmasitiya* (hospitality) (Khan & Amina, 2011), *drund nazar* (self-respect), *wafa* (loyalty), and *badal* (revenge) (Spain, 1985; Rzehak, 2012). Kakar (2004) argued that in Pashtun society, honor (*izzat*, particularly related to women) is highly valued, and a person without honor is not valued in Pathan society. This honor is protected through the principles of *namos* (respect), *gherat* (honor), *nang-o-namos* (chivalry), *badal* (revenge), and bravery (Benson et al., 2014). Shaheen (n.d.) states that in Pashtun society, the concept of honor is highly valued and often attached to women compared to men. Every Pashtun man is strictly vigilant regarding his honor and never wants his women to be humiliated openly at any cost (Anderson, 1975). Any Pashtun who does not follow the code of Pashtunwali in its spirit is considered deviant. This code constitutes an integral aspect of Pashtun culture and is

essential in molding notions of masculine identity among Pashtuns (Rzehak, 2012).

The social exclusion of folk artists is also due to the prevalence of social stratification among Pashtuns. They are socially stratified into class and caste-based divisions or professional or occupational stratification (Grima, 1993). Profession-based stratification includes *kulal* (potter), *mochi* (shoemaker), *naai* (chef), and *dum* (musicians/performer), etc., which clearly shows that musicians are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and *tabla nawaz* ranks at the lowest status within musicians. Therefore, the word *dum* is considered offensive, and most practicing Pashtuns take it as abuse, which is why it is disparagingly used. The dilemma is that mainstream Pashtun society does not recognize folk artists as Pashtun and their profession as masculine (Enevoldsen, 2004). The Pashtun society generally associates singing, dancing, and music with women, and men who perform such activities are socially alienated (Khattak, 2005).

Historically, *hujrah* (a male guest place) is an important and basic institution of Pashtun culture, and with *hujrah*, the Pashtun norms are complete (Spain, 1985). *Hujrahs* have always given importance to folk music and artists in the past, but now the culture is gradually transforming and becoming more rigid towards folk artists. Landlords and aristocrats had always patronized folk artists. They would provide them with money, food, and shelter to free them from economic problems. This generosity of socially affluent people allowed folk artists to concentrate on music and art (Nasiri, n.d). Saeed (2005) narrates that music and dance can be spiritual experiences for some people, and they help them express themselves through music and dance.

The plight of folk artists in Pashtun society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was greatly affected when Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) succeeded in forming a government (2002-2007) in the former North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The party had enormous political clout but, sadly, was against music and art, considering it to cause immorality and corruption in society. According to an author, “in many areas of Peshawar (provincial capital), musicians and drum beaters were arrested through police” (Khan, 2014: 306). Many folk artists were compelled to leave their homes and seek asylum in other countries (Sardar Ali Takkar and Haroon Bacha are the prime examples), which were less hostile to them. A few who could not relocate changed their profession (Sisario, 2008).

Besides MMA, the rise of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, also known as the Pakistan Taliban) annihilated music production in the region. As the TTP

gained influence over more and more territory, including Peshawar, streets fell silent, which once reverberated with all forms of music, such as *qawali* (a form of spiritual singing), folk, or contemporary music. Artisans making musical instruments, and their workshops were shut down as well as threatening musicians and killing them was the new social order (Khan, 2021). Hyder (2016) reports that, gradually, music revival became possible in Peshawar, where the Pakistani Taliban had banned musicians. The past experiences of many folk artists and musicians changed their perspective, and it was difficult for them to trust and rejuvenate their profession. However, after the 18th constitutional amendment, the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa set up the Directorate of Culture (DoC) to manage arts and culture in the region. In this regard, a cultural policy 2018 was drafted to protect, promote, and revive the diversity of Cultural heritage in the province. However, the policy did not meet the expectations of singers and artists, and they were disappointed. They called it a “mere eyewash” and referred to 2018 as a “gloomy year for artists” (Shinwari, 2018).

Expectations from Pashtun Men

Dominant masculine roles are essential in the gender division of roles in all modern and traditional societies (Worell, 2002). In the Pashtun society, there is a strong link between different concepts like masculinity, masculine expectations, and gender inequality due to socioeconomic differences (Aurat Foundation, 2016a). Folk artists are the marginalized segment of Pashtuns, evident from the expected roles and responsibilities assigned to Pashtun men. In general, the expectations of Pashtun society are different for both males and females; a man should be the dominant, and a woman should be passive. This division of expectations leads to power relationships in the family and society. In Pashtun society, folk artists are assumed to care less about their expected roles. The masculine expectations in Pashtun society are the center of gravity and a vital factor of the social and economic inequalities, and these inequalities lead to dominance or subjugation in gender relationships. Folk artists have very few economic resources; therefore, they are subjugated to wealthy people. The rich people do not consider themselves equals and essential parts of society, often referring to them as “*naai*” and “*dum*” (chef and musicians), which manipulates their social and cultural identity (Ghaffar, 1983; Brittan, 1998).

Social prestige and respect are fundamental dimensions of the human mind and personality grooming. Men’s dominance, aggression, and masculinity are often linked and vary based on social, cultural, and professional differences. It is commonly observed that poor men and economically weak people have

low social status, and the same is true for folk artists because their profession is strongly condemned by the Pashtun society (Khan, 2014). There is a misconception among Pashtuns that every Pashtun man carries natural masculine characteristics, such as aggression, toughness, physical strength, courage, independence, violence, and fearlessness. The socio-biological account of the personality and the human body affirms that men's bodies are the bearers of natural masculinity, including tendencies like domination, assertiveness, independence, aggression, hostility, and competitiveness (Connell, 1995).

The Pashtun society is strongly patriarchal, where masculinity is associated with aggression, dominance, strength, power, courage, and control over others, particularly women, children, and dependents. From birth, male and female children are socialized in different ways, which leads to their masculine and feminine identities later in life. Pashtun men are expected to provide for their families and protect their virtue, honor, and good social reputation. Being hyper-masculine is necessary for maintaining social respect and position in the Pashtun society, which is deeply connected to a man's financial and professional status. In a patriarchal society, being a man means being dominant, controlling, sound, and composed socially and economically, with authority over the immediate surroundings regarding reputation and respect (Aurat Foundation, 2016b).

Theoretical Framework of Hegemonic Masculinity

R.W. Connell's (1995) theoretical framework is based on the social scientific analysis of masculinity. Her notion of hegemonic masculinity encompasses authority, physical toughness, strength, heterosexuality, and paid work. Therefore, Pashtun society tries to maintain the status and social position of being a "*nar saray*" (hegemonic masculine) and suppress or marginalize the "*na saray*" (subordinate masculinity). *Nar saray* is expected to be dominant and independent in almost every aspect of Pashtun society. *Peghoray* (taunts) and *be-sharam* (coward) are terms a *nar saray* uses for a *na saray* to marginalize and contest his masculinity.

Pashtun men feel stigmatized and threatened because of pressures of masculinity when these terms are being used for them. As a result, Pashtun society categorizes folk artists under the category of *na saray* due to their less control over their women's bodies and their earnings. The social fabric of Pashtun society indicates that women's earnings outside the home challenge men's power and authority, which is why women are discouraged from economic activity in the public sphere. According to the orthodox

interpretation of Pashtun society, *nar saray* enjoys a privileged position due to their admired masculine traits. In contrast, *saray* or *na saray* is controlled and dominated by *nar saray*. Pashtun society views artists and performers as morally corrupt individuals who do not uphold the values of honor and respect toward their female family members. Some professional folk artists, musicians, and performers train their female family members to become professional artists to earn money. This behavior indicates a disregard for the code of Pashtunwali, which is one of the reasons why Pashtuns hold them in contempt.

Research Methodology

Qualitative methodology was employed to study comprehensively the socio-cultural phenomenon of Pashtun artists—undiscovered areas of the issue under discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The qualitative research method provided rich data to study nuances of the pressures of masculinity embedded in their perceptions and experiences faced by the marginalized section of Pashtun folk artists. The population of the present study was Islamabad Bazar (also known as Chitrali Bazar) and Kabari Bazar in Peshawar city. After collecting the data, thematic analysis was carried out by developing codes, creating initial themes from the codes, refining them, and defining and identifying them before producing a final report (Braun & Clark, 2006). The rationale for studying a single musician category is based on the plethora of social and economic issues musicians encounter, particularly *tabla nawaz*. Therefore, this study attempts to surface the problems of musicians as folk artists and their social acceptance in Pashtun society from the lens of Connell's hegemonic masculinity.

Data Findings and Discussion

The status of Pashtun folk artists in Pashtun society has been associated with many factors. However, a multidimensional thematic analysis is presented below.

Impact of Pashtun Hegemonic Masculinity on Folk Artists

The Pashtun ethnic group holds a particular notion of masculinity, where biological males (*saray* in Pashto) are not considered masculine unless they conform to the normative standard. In other words, the Pashtun society considers dominant and assertive men as the epitome of masculinity.

“In this society, men who dominate and suppress women and force their women to do purdah (veil) are recognized as masculine.”

Conversely, society looks down upon folk artists for their leniency towards women who do not observe purdah (veil) strictly. Folk artists are also criticized for not confining their women to their houses. In Pashtun society, only men are expected to be breadwinners, and the fact that female family members of folk artists also support their families economically is seen as a violation of cultural expectations of men. The artists claim they earn and provide for their female family members but do not order them to observe purdah (veil). They are labeled as “emasculated and effeminate men.”

“People taunt us for using the money earned by our women, and even if we do not use their money, society will still treat us in the same way.”

In the more conservative interpretation, men restrict women to their homes as they are believed to be the keepers of honor. Any harm to a woman’s honor, defined by strict observance of dominant gender norms, is taken very seriously. Families that fail to keep their honor lose all respect. Society blames folk artists for their perceived lax attitude towards their women, who have no control over their bodies and choices. The selected folk artists claimed that their women never danced in public, but they had examples of artists who performed dance routines and were called *kanjars* (an offensive term). Patriarchy is deeply rooted in Pashtun society and culture, where men consider themselves justified in exercising masculine power in cases of violence against women.

In Pashtun society, a man should be economically and professionally sound in order to be respected. All professions considered masculine are considered the right professions. A profession is a means of subsistence and carries significant meanings. Most of the time, a profession becomes a major part of a person’s identity. In Pashtun society, nursing or singing would be considered feminine professions, and men in these professions are considered deviants. Conversely, Pashtuns consider policemen honorable and masculine because they undertake a fearless job. Folk artists are viewed as entertainers indulging in a womanly activity to entertain others.

Public Perception of Musicians

Public perception has been an essential yardstick for measuring the social acceptability of artists, particularly folk artists, who are often viewed as culturally inappropriate and socially alienated. They are criticized and ostracized regardless of their skill or civilized demeanor. As per the dominant opinion, typically, people consider this profession as a feminine profession, and the association of men is often stigmatized and labeled as ‘pimp.’ A participant expressed in a complaining tone.

“People do not differentiate between kanjars (a highly abusive word for a male who allows his women to dance in public) and sazinda (musicians) which is why they put us in the category of kanjars. Also, when we play music with singers, then people look at us as men, but when we play music with a dancing girl, we are seen as emasculated men.”

This classification of social acceptability undermines artists and places them in a culturally disapproved category. Faisal et al. (2020) study highlighted that many people have a narrow-minded view of artists and their work. They need to recognize that art is a profession that provides for one’s livelihood. Some participants in the study believed that artists were engaged in immoral activities, such as drug use, theft, and association with unsavory individuals. Unfortunately, such immoral behavior is often associated with music and dance in Pashtun society. This leads to the use of highly offensive terms like “kanjar,” “dala,” or “barwa” (which means “dancer” or “pimp”) to refer to artists. A research participant shared,

“Those people who do not differentiate between music and dance as distinct art forms, they call them pimps instead of artists.”

The double standards in Pashtun society are that men are expected to work and support their families. If a man fails to do so, society blames him. However, a folk artist is always caught in a catch-22 situation because he works to provide for his family. Still, patriarchal society does not encourage him and ridicules both him and his profession.

Folk Artists: Cultural Extinction?

Artists highlighted that government policies and bureaucracy are responsible for the social alienation of the artists. The closure of Nishtar Hall (a place known for organizing cultural events) in Peshawar reiterates the government's verdict that artists corrupt society. Therefore, they should not be accommodated in the public sphere. The MMA government in KP was particularly hostile towards art and artists compared to the other provincial governments. Jairazbhoy's (1993) article states that Pakistan did not promote music due to the presence of religious fundamentalism. A participant narrated an incident in the MMA era about his shop in the following words.

“We don't get respect from our profession, people only respect wealth, not an artist. I had a music instruments shop at Dabgaree Bazar, but these merciless people burnt it down; my little children were crying to see the shop burning.”

A few research participants said that they watched a shop in flames, and the angry mob who had torched the shop also obstructed the fire brigade while the police stood as calm spectators. Later, the police refused to lodge the First Information Report (FIR) against the culprits. They further explained that everybody took part in setting fire to the musical instrument with such zeal that even if someone was an infidel, they considered it a sacred duty. One of the shop owners even fell at the feet of the miscreant's leader and implored him to spare him and have mercy, but he refused to listen and kicked him to the ground. According to the report compiled by the Center for Peace and Cultural Studies, almost 1000-1500 music shops and centers were destroyed to purify society from the dirt of music and musicians (Buneri et al., 2014).

Folk artists expressed that sometimes the government favors an artist based on party affiliation. Some specific artists were also awarded prizes, but they were all singers. The government never gives musicians recognition. A few participants recalled that General Musharraf, the ex-president of Pakistan, was very fond of folk music. Whenever he visited Peshawar, he would invite musicians and singers to the governor's house or Fort Bala Hisar. An artist said,

“The provincial government never recognized our profession; the national government gave us awards and sponsored our trips to foreign countries.”

Those artists who worked at Pakistan Radio and Television said they did not enjoy performing at the government stations because of meager income, which is also given after a prolonged delay. On the contrary, private radio and television management efficiently clears artists' outstanding dues. An old *tabla nawaz* recalled

“During Bhutto’s regime, an accomplished artist would be given a job, but today, I was fired from Abasin Arts Council, where I worked as a tabla teacher.”

A few artists shared that Nishtar Hall is built for cultural activities, but the government lends it primarily to political and religious events. Government policies have deprived so many people of their sole means of earning without realizing that they do not have any alternative to sustain them. Historically, hujra culture used to protect them socially and economically, but now people only invite them occasionally (Buneri et al., 2014).

The Relegation of Folk Artists to Low Status

In Pashtun society, artists, particularly musicians, have been relegated to low-class status for several reasons. They are not seen as central to upholding Pashtunwali norms and are considered unimportant. According to Pashtuns, power and dominance are the primary features of a masculine man, which they perceive folk artists as lacking. Ghani Khan (2014) identifies the double standards of Pashtun society and laments that while Pashtuns historically and culturally love singing and dancing, they also hate musicians. Generally, artists belong to an inferior and shameful class (Nasiri, n.d.).

‘Naai’ refers to professional musicians in contemporary Pashtun society of lower social or economic class and caste. Their primary duty is to spread the message of somebody’s death and marriage, among others. Due to this role, they were relegated to a low position because *naai* men perform at marriage ceremonies for money, whereas *naai* women are expected to do domestic work for wealthy people to earn their livelihood. Another reason for their alienation is the acute poverty they live in. They are not substantially paid for their work; therefore, their economic life is declining. The majority of the artists shared that because of no or low-paid work, they remain economically dependent. Moreover, due to the artists’ poverty, people were not very forthcoming in lending money, worsening their economic hardships. Though poverty is trouble for a man, it is considered a curse for a man who earns from a feminine profession.

Those artists who are in this music profession by lineage faced the double brunt and agony of Pashtun society. These folk artists could not change their profession due to the Pashtuns' anti-artist attitude. Changing professions requires learning new skills, financial support, and time, which they could not afford. Therefore, they were compelled to keep their identity as musicians. A research participant shared, "It was almost impossible for folk artists to quit and switch to another profession because people don't like it."

Extremism and Folk Artists

The gradual destruction of the folk music profession in Pashtun society can be attributed to several factors. One of the major reasons is the growing extremism, where all sorts of music were attributed to sinful activities. This created a repulsion against the profession during the MMA's regime. As a result, anyone who wanted to advance in society would think twice before choosing music and art as a profession. In recent years, due to religious extremism, Pashtun society has become even more aggressive towards music and musicians. Singers and musicians have been targeted and, in some cases, even lost their lives in different parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Unfortunately, hujras (male guest houses) are being ideologically converted into religious preaching and teaching places rather than depicting the real cultural and social image of Pashtun society. As presented by Faisal et al. (2020), the Taliban after 9/11 were extremely against musical activities and musicians, and they "kidnapping them, imposing religiosity on them assaulting and destroying CD shops, threatened production houses, closing music schools, and studios and desecrating Sufi shrines" (9268).

Another major reason for the alienation of folk artists is the wave of intolerance that has swept through some groups in Pashtun society. The perception that art is sinful is gaining ascendancy in some groups among Pashtuns. Society associates folk artists with immorality and sexual laxity, often giving them the same names as they would call a prostitute. In contemporary Pashtun society, extra-religiosity has played a vital role in condemning folk artists and musicians. Pashtun society has become so intolerant that it refuses to accept folk artists as human beings worthy of equal treatment and respect. Thus, dominant masculinity or mainstream masculinity has also played a significant role in damaging folk artists.

Demonstration of Pashtun Masculinity and Folk Artists

The primary data conceptualizes that the quest for masculine power endorsed by culture becomes a crucial component for men in the patriarchal society of

the Pashtuns. The notion that men should be physically strong and emotionally composed is learned from family, friends, and society. In any case, a boy or a man is not expected to be moved by any emotional feeling and stay impassive because shedding a tear, even in grief, would label him as a coward. For instance, expressing a feeling of pain is associated with weakness because men are not admired if they express their feelings. This type of socialization and reinforcement of masculine norms creates a version of masculinity that is culturally approved (Aurat Foundation, 2016b; Victor, 2006) but, overall, very harmful to society.

In the Pashtun society, men are under social pressure to act like “masculine men”; therefore, men are expected to maintain physical fitness and mental agility. To act weak, emotionally, or non-conformist of Pashtun norms could be a threat to self-esteem and can bring a bad name to the demonstration or expression of manhood. The “ideal man,” according to the code of Pashtunwali, is required to be wise, rational, content, and independent to act and can exert his influence over others, particularly women. Pashtun society values and respects men who adhere to the norms of Pashtunwali and live according to the given standards of modesty, bravery, and masculinity.

Three terms are used: *saray*, *nar saray*, and *na saray*. *Saray* is a biological man. *Nar Saray* (masculine man) represents Pashtun’s hegemonic masculinity, which elevates the social status and prestige of a man who adheres to it. *Na saray* refers to the weakest masculinity, which is undesirable and unappreciated. Folk musicians usually should “fall into this category of individuals who do not conform to Pashtunwali.”

Furthermore, those men among folk artists who permit their female family members to perform publicly are also called *dala* (pimp); who permits their female family members to perform publicly, and it can never be compared with *nar saray*, a Pashtun ideal (Aurat Foundation, 2016b). Eisler and Skidmore (1997) set a standard of masculinity, stating that a man should be able to cope with masculine pressures, be physically strong to protect women and be emotionally sound when making decisions. Given this standard, folk artists need to meet the expectations of Pashtunwali.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that the social acceptance of folk artists is an issue of human rights. Folk artists’ integration, respect, and social acceptance in Pashtun society and art preservation are closely associated. Social acceptance of folk artists refers to Pashtunwali’s core values, which equally apply to

everyone in terms of respect and worth to humanity regardless of their profession and gender roles. This study focused on the impact of hegemonic masculinity on the personal and social life of folk artists. However, society puts artists in the “unmanly” category due to their profession. Folk artists often feel alienated from others and may be compelled to leave their profession. The rise of extremism both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly after 9/11, had made their lives miserable. Pashtun society patronized art and artists in the past, but now art is sometimes viewed as sinful. As a result, many folk artists leave the music profession without many opportunities to earn a living and meet their needs.

This anti-artist attitude is unique to Pashtun society. In most other societies, artists enjoy honor and respect. But Pashtuns look down upon the artist as feminine men. The masses should be educated through different media to reshape their concept of masculinity. A version of masculinity that oppresses certain groups is known as hegemonic masculinity, and this dominant form of masculinity must be reconsidered to combat social alienation not only for artists but for all professions that are unjustly stereotyped.

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