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“Boys Should Have the Courage to Ask a Girl Out”: Gender Norms in Early Adolescent Romantic Relationships



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore how gender norms emerge in romantic relationships among early adolescents (EAs) living in five poor urban areas.

Methods: Data were collected as part of the Global Early Adolescent Study. The current research analyzed data from interviews with 30 EAs (aged 11–13 years) living in five poor urban sites: Baltimore, Cuenca, Edinburgh, Ghent, and Nairobi. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in English using Atlas.ti, focusing on how EAs experience and perceive gender norms in romantic relationships.

Results: Across the five sites, only a few respondents described having been in love, the majority of whom were boys. Findings indicate that stereotypical gender norms about romantic relationships prevail across these cultural settings, depicting boys as romantically/sexually active and dominant, and girls as innocent with less (romantic) agency. In spite of the similarities, Nairobi was unique in that respondents referred to how sexual behavior and violence can occur within EA relationships. In all countries, heterosexuality was perceived to be the norm. Nevertheless, there were examples of EAs accepting homosexuality and expressing supportive attitudes toward equality between the sexes.

Conclusions: While EAs across five different cultural settings seem to endorse stereotypical gender norms in romantic relationships, a few stories also illustrate more gender-equal attitudes. As

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This international study describes how early adolescents experience and perceive gender norms in romantic relationships. While stereotypical gender norms about romantic relationships appear to prevail, there were exceptions of early adolescents endorsing gender equality. Uncovering the factors that contribute to the construction of more equal gender norms will contribute to more gender equal and healthy societies.

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stereotypical gender norms have a demonstrated negative effect on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and well-being, additional research is needed to understand which factors—at the interpersonal and structural level—contribute to the construction of these norms among EAs. © 2017 Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Research on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and well-being indicates the importance of gender inequalities as drivers of unhealthy outcomes for boys and girls [1]. Gender inequalities contribute to unsafe sexual behaviors that can lead to teenage pregnancy [2], intimate partner violence [3], and increased vulnerability to HIV infection [4]—especially for girls—as it puts them in a disadvantaged position to negotiate safe sex or to refuse unwanted sex [5]. Conversely, equal gender norms and attitudes can contribute to the capacity to feel and express sexual feelings and pleasure, contributing to sexual well-being [1,6].

Gender norms (GNs) operate at the individual, interpersonal, and political/societal level in shaping adolescent sexuality and well-being [1], and there is evidence that the construction of personal attitudes related to GNs tend to intensify during the period of early adolescence (ages 10–14 years) [7]. This article mainly focuses on the interpersonal level, and in particular, on romantic relationships. Given that adolescence is a period in which romantic relationships emerge in many settings [8], these relationships can be considered as the most immediate interpersonal context in which adolescents start to experience and express their sexuality and within which concerns about their sexual health arise [1,7]. Being involved in a romantic (and possibly sexual) relationship can provide an opportunity to develop skills [9] and form a basis for healthy relationships later in adolescence and beyond [10,11]. GNs have the potential of influencing the power and freedom for boys and girls to practice these skills and to express their feelings [2]. In most societies, a set of stereotypical GNs exist that expects boys to take the lead in romantic relationships and to believe that sexual pleasure is their privilege [2], while girls are expected to be sexually naïve and are easily stigmatized if thought to be sexually experienced before marriage [12–14].

As our understanding about the cross-cultural influences on adolescents' romantic relationships and their associated processes are still limited [8], the objective of this study is to increase our understanding about how GNs are perceived within romantic relationships among early adolescents (EAs) aged 11–13 years living in five different urban poor settings globally, as they are especially vulnerable for health risks [15]. Uncovering the GN that guide EAs as they start to explore romantic relationships is important for understanding how to guide all adolescents toward developing more gender-equal relationships, and as such, to more gender equal and healthy societies.

Methods

This qualitative research was conducted as part of the 15-country Global Early Adolescent Study which aims to understand the factors that predispose young people to sexual risks, and those that promote healthy sexuality across different cultural settings globally. The common denominator of the 15 study sites is that they are home to urban poor adolescents, a

vulnerable and rapidly growing population worldwide [16]. The choice for young populations in poor urban areas was based on the fact that adolescents living in these areas are more predisposed to a range of adverse sexual and reproductive health and other health outcomes [15]. For the present study, five cities with diverse social contexts were selected: Baltimore (United States), Cuenca (Ecuador), Edinburgh (Scotland), Ghent (Belgium) and Nairobi (Kenya). We conducted qualitative research with a purposive sample of 30 EAs in each site. Respondents were eligible to participate if they lived within the geographic boundary of the selected poor communities in each city, were aged between 11 and 13 years and gave informed assent. Data were collected through narrative in-depth interviews with EAs, which allowed agency among the respondents and permitted in-depth understanding of the discussed topics [17,18]. We focused on analyzing codes related to EAs' responses about their experiences and thoughts about “liking someone in a ‘romantic’ or ‘special’ way” characteristics of the respondents in each site. In Baltimore, Cuenca, Edinburgh, and Ghent, adolescents were identified through organizations (such as youth clubs, neighborhood associations, parishes, and schools) that work with young people and/or their parents. In Nairobi, adolescents and their parents were purposively selected from households participating in the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System [19] (see Table 1 for characteristics of interview sample). In Cuenca and Ghent, all interviews were first transcribed in the language of the interview and afterward translated to English. In Nairobi, the recordings were directly transcribed in English by a bilingual transcriber. In these three cities, translations were randomly checked for quality by the principal investigators. English

Table 1
Characteristics of the elected adolescents per site

Characteristics	Baltimore	Cuenca	Edinburgh	Ghent	Nairobi
Sex					
Boys	14	16	16	12	15
Girls	20	13	16	18	15
Ages					
11	17	10	13	9	15
12	10	11	17	11	6
13	7	8	2	10	9
Race/ethnicity					
Belgian				5	
Black/African	33				30
Hispanic	1				
Maghreb				8	
Mestizo		28			
Turkish				12	
White		1	31		
Other			1	5	
Family structure					
Two-(step)parent	19	25	22	17	26
Single parent	14	3	9	11	4
Other	1 missing	1	1 (grandmother)		
Interview language	English	Spanish	English	Dutch	English and Swahili

transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti (Scientific Software, Berlin; version 7) and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach [20]. Matrices of the key codes related to the article's objectives were then organized by site and sex to identify patterns both within and across the sites. Ethical approval for the Global Early Adolescent Study was obtained from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board, the World Health Organization Ethical Review Board, and by local ethics review committees in each country. A detailed description of the qualitative data collection and analytical methods is provided by Mmari et al. [20] in this Journal's supplement.

Results

We identified seven central themes related to how GNs are experienced or perceived to be manifested in two different stages of romantic relationships among EAs: (1) being in love and becoming a couple (personal experiences, types of relationships, starting a relationship, the role of friends, and the role of parents) and (2) the experience of being in a romantic relationship (activities of adolescent couples and the negative context of romantic relations).

Being in love and becoming a couple

Personal experiences. Across the five cities, very few EAs indicated that they were already in love or had liked somebody in a "special" way; of those who did, the majority was boys. Consequently, many EAs across all the sites discussed romantic feelings and/or relationships of their peers with somebody they knew from school.

Types of relationships. In Baltimore, Edinburgh, Ghent, and Nairobi, respondents indicated that relationships at early ages can be based on genuine mutual feelings and that EAs demonstrate these feelings by helping each other or doing things together.

He does help me with a lot of stuff ... that I go through. He will help me because usually I can't really deal with most of the stuff that go[es] on. Like having trouble at school and the bullying (Baltimore, girl aged 13 years).

He likes talking and playing with her, everything they do, they do it together (Nairobi, boy aged 12 years).

However, respondents (mainly girls) in all cities—except for Edinburgh—also told stories about how boys sometimes have relationships with girls whom they do not really have feelings for.

Sometimes there are also boys—and that happens a lot—that say like "I think it's mega macho to have a sweetheart. So I'm not in love with her but I'm doing it" (Ghent, boy aged 12 years).

One girl in Cuenca mentioned this lack of genuine feelings for her boyfriend as well.

I do not love him... I just like him because he is handsome... (Cuenca, girl aged 11 years).

When talking about romantic relationships, EAs generally referred to heterosexual relationships. Exceptions included one

boy from Baltimore who stated that there are no same-sex relationships in his school when the interviewer asked about this, and one respondent in Edinburgh and Cuenca, respectively, expressed their support of nonheterosexual relations.

As you become older you do, you start to have feelings for boys, but if you are a girl that likes girls then you start to feel things for girls (Edinburgh, girl aged 12 years).

Between man and man. No, I would not say it is good or bad; because the decision is theirs, no one can make the decision for them as they are people and everyone chooses his fate (Cuenca, boy aged 12 years).

Starting a relationship. Except in Edinburgh, EAs described how romantic relationships are typically initiated by boys. Both boys and girls indicated that boys should do this explicitly by talking to the girl.

I think that a boy should do that [asking a girl out] and if he doesn't have the courage to, then I find that very cowardly... Because otherwise he won't actually stand up for you when something happens.... Because otherwise it's not a boy (Ghent, girl aged 12 years).

They [boys] are the ones who are supposed to look for girls but girls can't look for boys (Nairobi, boy aged 13 years).

In Nairobi alone, EAs also stated that boys sometimes use force to initiate relationships with girls.

They [female friends] will tell you, you accompany them to go and meet a certain boy who says he is in love with you, so if you refuse... That is when they plan [with the boy] on how you will be caught. The boy will pay some of the older boys to come and catch you (Nairobi, girl aged 13 years)

Despite the norm that boys should take the initiative, boys in Baltimore and Ghent also reported shyness or stress to do so.

When a boy likes a girl, and he wants her, or he wants to ask her if she wants to be his girlfriend, then you're stressed (Ghent, boy aged 12 years).

If a guy like meets someone that he has feelings for some time he doesn't know how to say it, so it takes a lot for him to get out his words (Baltimore, boy aged 12 years).

Nevertheless, in all cities, there were also cases described by adolescents taking the first step toward a romantic relation. Girls in Baltimore additionally mentioned that they were afraid of being rejected. EAs in Edinburgh, Ghent, and Nairobi also said that some girls made themselves pretty and flirted to get a boy's attention.

They go close to boys, put on miniskirt, walk half naked and they put on high heels (Nairobi, boy aged 13 years).

The role of friends. Furthermore, in all cities, EAs and particularly girls described how their friends, mainly those of the same sex, helped to communicate love messages.

A girlfriend who sat next to me and told me absolutely everything. She said—this fellow said he loves you (Cuenca, girl aged 12 years).

I don't know. Because they're all embarrassed, and twisting their hair and they go, and they look up and it's like "just go

over”. And she goes “nope, you do it for me.” And then the friend always goes “I’ll do it” (Edinburgh, girl aged 12 years).

Across all cities, girls—more than boys—also seemed to discuss romantic feelings among each other. In Edinburgh and Ghent, boys indicated that they did not really talk about their girlfriend but just mentioned to their friends that they have one.

It [the fact of having a girlfriend] was just said. There wasn’t much show about it, because it happened quite a lot (Ghent, boy aged 13 years).

Girls in all cities, except for Baltimore, indicated that they experienced peer pressure from other girls to engage or not engage in romantic (and sexual) behavior.

There are other groups of girls who will not allow a girl from their group to be picked by any of the boys (Nairobi, girl aged 13 years).

She started flirting with a boy, I told her “stop flirting, just go for it, just ask him out if you really like him” (Edinburgh, girl aged 12 years).

In Cuenca, there was one boy who encouraged girls to stay single and focus on their studies, and one boy in Ghent mentioned that having a girlfriend was not accepted by his peer group.

But that [being a couple] actually isn’t allowed, I mean, in our team (Ghent, boy aged 13 years).

The role of parents. Several adolescent respondents in Baltimore, Ghent, and Nairobi mentioned that parents often do not approve of their daughters having boyfriends.

She sometimes says like “Yeah, all boys are the same and they all have the same things in mind. They tell you that they like you but they use you just as ‘someone in between’ or so... And when they leave or so, they break your heart...” (Ghent, girl aged 12 years).

Fathers usually are excited when their son gets a girlfriend, but when a daughter gets a boyfriend it is not so... Because it is their son they grew him up to be a man and that are not as protective as they is to the daughters, they are their little princess” (Baltimore, boy aged 13 years).

In Nairobi, not only girls but also boys stated that their parents warned them not to be in a romantic relationship.

My dad, he will beat me and tell me never to see me with her (Nairobi, boy aged 11 years).

He [my father] might refuse to pay my school fee and tell me that if I want a boyfriend I can leave the house and go and stay with the boyfriend (Nairobi, girl aged 12 years).

Experience of being in a romantic relationship

Activities of adolescent couples. In general, girls and boys described three broad categories of activities in which EAs couples engage: platonic (e.g., talking—all cities), romantic (e.g., walking hand in hand or with their arm around each other—all cities), and sexual activities. The last category was only mentioned by a few respondents, mainly by girls in Nairobi.

There was one day when they were caught behind the school toilets having sex (Nairobi, girl aged 12 years).

Across all study sites, EAs also discussed how boys and girls can give each other money or presents as a way of expressing their feelings.

She gives me money for [during the] break (Edinburgh, boy aged 12 years).

He bought me something, he bought me like a little purse or like some lip gloss (Baltimore, girl aged 13 years).

Negative context of romantic relationship. For a few boys and girls, romantic relationships and sexual activities seemed to have a negative connotation. In Ghent, Nairobi, and Edinburgh, EAs used words such as “dirty” or “bad” when referring to sexual intercourse and condoms.

In addition, across sites, respondents mentioned undesirable consequences for girls who engage in intimate relationships with boys, such as physical abuse (Nairobi, Edinburgh), emotional abuse (Ghent, Baltimore), and the risk of losing a good reputation (Cuenca, Nairobi).

They can be raped...They say that they should avoid boys because they can be misled and then the boys will sleep with them... They can contract a disease... They can get pregnant... She becomes bad and the men around here will not like it and therefore she will ruin her life (Nairobi, boy aged 13 years).

They [boys] could be really good looking but they could abuse you. They could do something really badly (Edinburgh, girl aged 12 years).

Discussion

Our findings indicate that personal experiences of romantic relationships among EAs in our sample were relatively uncommon. This result corresponds with previous research conducted in the United States, which found that relatively few (36%) EAs aged 10–13 years reported having had a “special” romantic relationship in the last 18 months [21]. It is also in line with the ecological framework for adolescent health developed by Blum et al. [15] indicating that young people not only enter adolescence with environmental resources and vulnerabilities but also with biological ones. This could mean that the majority of our respondents were just not ready yet (emotionally, physically, and cognitively) to (admit to) being in a romantic relationship.

However, despite their lack of own experience of being in romantic relationships, EAs endorsed similar GNs about relationships across the five study sites. Almost all respondents talked about heterosexual relationships, which are consistent with previous research indicating that for many adolescents, community and cultural norms determine who is acceptable as a romantic target [8].

In addition, there were several examples of how EAs endorsed stereotypical masculinity norms depicting boys as romantically/sexually active and dominant, and girls as innocent with less (romantic) agency. First, EAs that mentioned having been in a relationship were mainly boys, and second, many EAs stated that boys should take the lead in romantic relationships; asking a girl out and being dominant or sometimes even violent toward their (desired) girlfriend. Third, peer pressures to be in romantic relationships are manifested differently for girls and boys. Various respondents indicated that boys might engage in

relationships without actually loving the girl to fit in among their peers. In contrast, girls discussed the need to declare their feelings to the boy they like and to engage in a relationship only if genuinely interested. These findings are in line with previous research showing that adolescent girls are subjected to strong pressures to only engage in sexual behaviors within the context of romantic relationships and not outside of it [6,8].

The diverse examples of stereotypical gender roles—i.e., widely accepted types of behavior that are desired from both sexes and are based on the conception that femininity is inferior to masculinity—in romantic relationships found in the present study correspond with those from a recent systematic review of factors that shape gender attitudes in EAs, which found that EAs across the world commonly endorse stereotypical norms of masculine sexual prowess in contrast to feminine deference and lack of (sexual) power [22]. Our findings are also in line with the research by Tolman et al. [1,23] in the United States, which point out that gender plays a key role in shaping ASRH and explain how masculinity and femininity ideologies function in tandem to reproduce gender-inequitable relationships. Because the norm that girls should not take direct initiatives to start a relationship, and boys should, both sexes uphold the existence of stereotypical gender roles that ascribe more power to boys.

Gender operates at the individual, interpersonal, and structural level [1,2]. As our study revealed similarities between different cities, it illustrates how gender at the structural level may influence interpersonal romantic relationships. An explanatory factor for the congruency between the involved cities could be an inadequacy of policy makers to translate their national and regional policies on gender equality to the educational level. In their global review (2015) of “comprehensive sexuality education” (CSE), UNESCO indicates that a gap remains between policies and the actual implementation of CSE [24]. Moreover, Haberland [25] provided strong evidence that including gender in CSE leads to better sexual health outcomes. It could also be the fact that all participants were selected from urban areas with sizable economically disadvantaged populations. Although poverty refers to diverse social contexts in the different sites, it could be that the similar type of vulnerabilities, such as belonging to an ethnic minority or low socioeconomic status [15], are crucial factors that have more impact on defining gender norms than national contexts. At the interpersonal level, the role of parents could be taken into account to explain the similarities between the cities. Our findings corresponds with the research of Jerves et al. (2014) in Ecuador, and Madsen (2008) in the United States which pointed out that parents are more likely to apply supervision rules to regulate and control their daughters' dating activities than their sons' [26,27].

In spite of the similarities between the five study sites, Nairobi was unique in some respects. In comparison to the other sites, more respondents (mostly girls) referred to advanced sexual behavior and to violence (from boys toward girls) within EAs couples. Studies suggest that early sexual activity among adolescents living in the slums of Nairobi may stem from early exposure to sexual activity due to the small houses (lack of privacy for parents) and transactional sex due to high poverty levels [28,29]. The reporting of violence is also consistent with the high prevalence of violence reported nationally [30].

Although our data revealed stereotypical GN being most dominant, there were also a few respondents who provided examples of more egalitarian gender perspectives. For example, we heard the voices of adolescents who attributed greater

agency to girls in romantic relationship, for example, asking a boy out or offering him a present, and there were also examples of boys who did not identify with the typical “macho” gender role. Some respondents also expressed support for same-sex relationships. These alternative stories could indicate the first steps in a change toward more gender equal norms, a tendency which is, according to the research of Dorius and Firebaugh [31], occurring worldwide and which is also described by Harrison et al. [5] based on research conducted in South Africa and in the systematic review of Kågesten et al. [22]. The former states that both men's and women's ideas of normative gender roles in sexual relationships are changing, but that the enactment of new roles is a slow and dynamic process. In the latter, Kågesten et al. found that many EAs, particularly girls, explicitly challenged gender stereotypes, indicating that attitudes during this period of life are amenable to change. In her research among adolescents in Ecuador, Goicolea et al. [6] illustrated how a change toward more equal GN could lead to more consensual sex and pleasure. Our data suggests that this positive shift toward equality can also be found in the context of romantic relationships, which are not necessarily sexual yet.

The current findings should be interpreted within the limitations of our research. First, given that we conducted qualitative interviews with a small sample of purposively selected EAs in each setting, our findings are not representative of the entire EA population in these cities. Second, it is possible that the overall endorsement of stereotypical GN led to socially desirable answers; for example, boys over-reporting and girls under-reporting their romantic experiences. Third, in terms of reflexivity it is possible that our own perspectives concerning the study topics influenced which findings were highlighted, and the conclusions made. For example, it was not always clear for the researchers when the adolescents spoke about their own experiences, or experiences they observed or heard about which could also have led to an over-reporting by respondents and researchers toward stereotypical GN. The credibility of the findings is however strengthened by the fact that similar findings emerged across the different sites [32].

Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to investigate GN related to romantic relationships among EAs in urban poor environments. Our results point to the need for additional research on how GNs can influence romantic relationships and on how structural and interpersonal factors can influence GNs. A better understanding of these processes could contribute to the improvement of gender equal relationships and healthy ASRH trajectories.

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confirm, however, that this author has made a significant contribution to the article in line with the authorship criteria of The Journal of Adolescent Health.

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