

# Teenage Students' Perceptions of Gender Customs and Their Relationship with Bullying Behavior in Saudi Arabia 2024

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## Abstract:

**Background:** Detecting the magnitude and determinants of bullying among Teenage students is important for starting suitable preventive measures. Unfair gender norms are becoming more widely recognized as a threat to one's health and wellbeing. Despite the fact that adolescence is a crucial developmental stage before adulthood, little is known about how teenagers view gender norms.

**This study aimed:** To assess the teenage students' perceptions of gender customs and their relationship with bullying behavior in Saudi Arabia 2024.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study of a sample of 200 students 11-17 years from five public schools in Saudi Arabia was conducted. Data were collected via interviewer administered questionnaires using the Gender Norms Scales and School Life Survey tool for bullying.

**Results:** There was not a significant distinction between male and female teenage students' opinions toward relationship participation; nevertheless, boys were marginally more tolerant of partnerships than girls (54.4% and 46.1%, respectively). However, girls were substantially more likely than boys to say that they agreed with a sexual double standard in reference to boy/girl interactions (75% vs. 46.4%,  $P < 0.001$ ). Although there was no discernible difference between the perceptions of girls and boys regarding gender stereotyped qualities, guys were more likely to endorse them, and 64.3% of them felt more agreement with these traits than girls did (57.4%). Additionally, traditional gender roles were more likely to be expressed by boys than by girls (74% vs. 52.9%,  $P < 0.001$ ). Nonetheless, 51% of students thought it was OK to make fun of a boy who behaved like a girl, and 27.5% said it was acceptable to make fun of a girl who did the same. The degree of bullying and victimization experienced by students did not significantly correlate with any of the gender norms concepts that were explored.

**Conclusions:** Early adolescence is when the perception of unequal gender norms begins

to emerge. While girls are more conservative and more prone to believe that there is a sexual double standard in reference to boy/girl interactions, boys are more tolerant of hetero-normative relationships among teenagers and are more likely to support stereotyped gender roles. Adolescents of both sexes also felt that boys were more likely than girls to be viewed as deserving of punishment for aberrant gender practices. However, the perception of gender by both boys and girls is unrelated to their experiences of victimization and bullying. This has significant ramifications for comprehending how gender norms evolve and how they affect teenage behavior and social interactions.

**Keywords** Perceptions, Teenage Students, Gender Customs, Bullying Behavior

### **Introduction:**

In the process of developing their character, adolescents view school as a life experience. It has advantages including fostering social connections, developing cognitive abilities, learning responsibility, and becoming independent <sup>(1)</sup>. But it could also become a traumatic event and cause agony that lasts the remainder of one's life. One of the most obvious causes of challenging childhood or adolescent experiences seems to be exposure to violence, both in its physical and symbolic manifestations <sup>(2)</sup>.

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that peer violence is a significant part of this experience, and the phenomena of bullying in schools are a clear reflection of this <sup>(3)</sup>. Bullying is a multifaceted habit that has connections to age, education, and health. Since the early 1970s, it has continued to be the subject of research. A frequent definition of it is the intentional, repetitive, and prolonged act of aggression committed by a group or individual against a victim who is unable to protect them <sup>(4)</sup>.

Teenagers (10–19 years old) make up a sizable section of the population worldwide (16%) <sup>(5, 6)</sup>. Gender norms and other aspects of the teenagers' social environment greatly influence their ability to successfully transition into adulthood <sup>(7)</sup>. One of the fifth Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to achieve gender equality and transform patriarchal norms <sup>(8)</sup>. As a result, Blum et al., (2019) <sup>(9)</sup> the Working Group prioritized adolescent engagement in gender equality efforts in 2018.

The commonly recognized customs regarding the roles, characteristics, behaviors, position, and power that are associated with both sexes in a particular society are known as gender norms <sup>(10)</sup>. Unfair gender norms, particularly in low- and middle-income nations, contribute to gender inequality, which has a number of detrimental effects, including early marriage and violence, as well as discrimination based on gender in the workplace and in schools <sup>(11)</sup>.

Globally, bullying is pervasive and on the rise, with more than one in three students between the ages of 13 and 15 experiencing peer bullying. Nearly the same percentage of students commits physical assault. Although both sexes are generally at similar risk of assault, men are more likely to face physical violence and threats, while women are more susceptible to psychological and symbolic assault <sup>(12, 13)</sup>. School bullying is considered great health and educational problem within Saudi society. UNICEF (2017) <sup>(13)</sup> reported that 27% of young Saudis aged (13- 15) were reported to be exposed to bullying and peer-to-peer violence which is spreading worldwide <sup>(13)</sup>.

This phenomena runs counter to the educational goals established by the Saudi Official Education Policy, which include giving adults a variety of skills and knowledge

and enhancing age-appropriate positive behavioral patterns<sup>(14)</sup>. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has 203,000 public schools that serve over 4.5 million children and teenagers, employing 390,000 instructors and over 105,000 administrative personnel<sup>(15)</sup>. Consequently, schools provide a crucial social environment that has both advantages and disadvantages. However, they may expose the younger generations to a number of concerns, such as the possibility of assault, violence, and risky behavior.

Moreover, gender's effect on health could be observed in multiple ways, including differential exposure to risk and differential access to healthcare and other material resources<sup>(16)</sup>. Hence, understanding adolescents' perception of gender norms is an important step to build upon it. One of the other problems whose roots start in adolescence is violence.

Reviewing literature showed that gender norms might play a role in the extent to which adolescents experience bullying, as adolescents who do not conform to norms are more likely to be bullied. Additionally, adolescent girls may expect gender-based violence as part of the socialization process<sup>(17-19)</sup>. This study aimed to assess the teenage students' perceptions of gender customs and their relationship with bullying behavior in Saudi Arabia 2024.

## Methods

A cross-sectional study was done in five public schools in Saudi Arabia from January to July 2024. The Epi Info software program version 7.1.5 was used to calculate the sample size. With a 95% confidence interval and a population size, the minimum sample size needed was 184 participants, assuming that 50% of the students had stereotypical gender norms and a 5% margin of error. The final total sample size was 200 students after adding 5% for possible nonresponse.

Data were collected using an interviewer-administered questionnaire which started with some socio-demographic data like age, sex, parents' educational levels, parents' occupation, and family structure (living with single or both parents). After that, the questionnaire was divided into two parts: ***the first part is Gender norms:*** The used measure of Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS)<sup>(20)</sup> is the gender norms scale. It covered four dimensions: hetero-normative romantic relationships among adolescents (six items), sexual double standards (four items), stereo-typical gender traits (seven items), and stereotypical gender roles (five items).

This instrument was formed by using themes identified in narrative interviews with adolescents and their parents to measure gender norms among young adolescents internationally. Items are all designed on a 5-point Likert scale (1: disagree a lot, 2: disagree a little, 3: neither agrees nor disagrees, 4: agree a little, 5: agree a lot), and it was tested for face validity. The internal reliability was assessed by computing poly-choric ordinal Cronbach's alpha<sup>(20)</sup>. Also, the Arabic version of the instrument was provided. For the scoring procedure, scores were computed as a mean score across items of each subscale, with each individual score ranging from 1 to 5, based on the 5-point Likert scale<sup>(20, 21)</sup>. Then, by using the mean score as a cut-off point, the participants are classified to adolescents with less agreement and adolescents with more agreement of each studied gender norms concepts.

The second part is ***Bullying and victimization:*** We used the School Life Survey tool to detect the frequency of bullying and victimization<sup>(22)</sup>. It is formed of a bullying scale and a victimization scale, and each of them contains many items which cover the

three types of bullying and victimization (physical, verbal, and relational). It consists of 9 items for the bullying scale and 15 items for the victimization scale. We summed the items in each scale to give an overall score of bullying or victimization. The frequency of four acts during the past 4 weeks was the cut-off level for detecting bullying or victimization. Regarding the psychometric properties, Cronbach's alpha of the whole scale is 0.85, and the 1-week test-retest reliability of the bullying scale and victimization scale was respectively 0.84 and 0.94<sup>(22)</sup>.

After taking the required administrative approvals from the local education directorates, researchers performed a pilot study on 10% of study sample from different schools to test the questionnaire appropriateness and to estimate the time required to complete it. The pilot study cases were not included in the sample of the main study. After orienting each school principal, consent forms were sent to parents of the chosen students explaining the purpose and procedures of the study. After obtaining parents written consents and adolescent assents from students, researchers invited each student to a personal interview to complete the questionnaire through a 20- to 30-min period during lunch breaks or other school periods.

Pre-coded data were entered on the computer using the SPSS version 28. The data were summarized using mean and standard deviation for quantitative variables, while frequency and percentages were used for qualitative variables. Statistical differences between groups were tested using the  $\chi^2$  test or its alternatives (Fisher's exact, Monte Carlo simulation) for qualitative variables and the Mann-Whitney test and Kruskal Wallis test for quantitative ones. Moreover, binary logistic regression analysis was used to assess the effect of participants' perception of the studied gender norms on bullying perpetration and victimization exposure. Significance was considered at a  $P$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ .

## Results

**Table (1)** shows a total of 200 school adolescents aged 11–16 years with a mean of  $12.77 \pm 1.68$  years were enrolled for this study. The entire sample included 98 boys (49.0%) and 102 girls (51.0%). The percentage of students in primary and preparatory schools was almost equal, with 40.5% and 40.2%, respectively. The parental characteristics showed that a higher percentage of fathers (38.5%) had completed their university education compared to mothers (31.5%).

Regarding their occupational status, only 3% of the students' fathers did not work, while nearly 70% of the students' mothers were housewives. The families of 91.8% of students were formed of married parents, while few of the students (8.2%) were living in single-parent households due to divorce, separation, or widowhood (**Table 1**).

**Table (1)** also displays the adolescent students' status with regard to bullying and victimization, where 30.2% of them were classified as victims and 29.8% of them were bully victims, while unique bullies (i.e., perpetrators) represented only 7.5% of the participated students.

**Table (1):** Demographic characteristics of the study sample

Variable	Frequency <i>N</i> = 200	Percent (%)
<b>Gender of the student</b>		
Male	98	49.0
Female	102	51.0
<b>Age(years)</b>		
Mean ± SD	12.77 ± 1.681	
<b>Educational level of the father</b>		
Illiterate/literacy classes	21	10.5
Basic education [primary or preparatory]	14	7.0
Secondary/technical	88	44.0
University degree/higher	77	38.5
<b>Educational level of the mother</b>		
Illiterate/literacy classes	23	11.5
Basic education [primary or preparatory]	18	9.0
Secondary/technical	96	48.0
University degree/higher	63	31.5
<b>Working status of the father</b>		
Working for cash	194	97.0
Not working for cash/unemployed	6	3.0
<b>Working status of the mother</b>		
Working for cash	59	29.5
Not working for cash/ housewife	141	70.5
<b>Family structure</b>		
Living with two parents	183	91.5
Other <sup>a</sup>	17	8.5
<b>Bullying/victimization status</b>		
Bully	15	7.5
Victim	60	30.0
Bully victim	60	30.0
Neither bully nor victim	65	32.5

<sup>a</sup> Single parent or other caregivers

**Table (2)** illustrates that there are significant differences between the perception of boys and girls for sexual double standards and stereotypical gender roles as 75% of girls had more agreement with questions related to sexual double standards compared to 46.4% of boys ( $P < 0.001$ ), while 74% of boys had more agreement with stereotypical gender roles compared to 52.9% of girls ( $P = < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, there are no significant differences between boys and girls for acceptance of romantic relationships and stereotypical gender traits. However, boys were more likely to indicate more agreement with adolescents' romantic relationships than girls, with 54.4% and 46.1%, respectively. Regarding sanctions for challenging gender roles, teasing boys who acted

like girls was more accepted among the study participants than teasing girls who acted like boys (**Table 2**).

**Table (2):** Gender norms among the study sample of adolescent students

Gender norms concept	Gender	Responses (%)					p-value
		Disagree a lot	Disagree a little	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree a little	Agree a lot	
<b>Adolescent acceptance of romantic relationships</b>							
It is normal for a boy your age to want a girlfriend	Boys	(16.8)	(5.1)	(4.1)	(26.5)	(47.5)	<b>0.044*</b>
	Girls	(10.3)	(2.9)	(8.3)	(34.8)	(43.7)	
It is normal for a girl to want a boyfriend at your age	Boys	(13.3)	(7.7)	(11.7)	(32.1)	(35.2)	<b>0.004*</b>
	Girls	(22.1)	(7.4)	(2.9)	(29.9)	(37.7)	
A girl should be able to have a boyfriend if she wants	Boys	(44.3)	(13.3)	(2.6)	(20.9)	(18.9)	0.456
	Girls	(52.5)	(13.1)	(1.5)	(15.7)	(17.2)	
A boy should be able to have a girlfriend if he wants	Boys	(30.6)	(12.2)	(2.6)	(17.3)	(37.3)	<b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	(38.3)	(18.1)	(3.4)	(22.1)	(18.1)	
Mean score (1–5, 5 indicating strongest approval of adolescent romantic relationships) (mean +/- SD)	Boys	3.315 ± 1.071					0.056
	Girls	3.120 ± 1.044					
<b>Sexual double standard</b>							
Boys have girlfriends to show off to their friends	Boys	(16.8)	(12.3)	(2.6)	(26.5)	(41.8)	<b>0.001</b>
	Girls	(5.9)	(8.3)	(4.9)	(25.0)	(55.9)	
Boys tell girls they love them when they do not	Boys	(14.3)	(17.3)	(6.1)	(27.6)	(34.7)	< <b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	(4.4)	(10.8)	(5.9)	(26.0)	(52.9)	
Mean score (1-5, 5 indicating strongest endorsement of sexual double standard) (mean +/- SD)	Boys	3.861 ± 0.832					< <b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	4.366 ± 0.620					
<b>Stereotypical gender traits: toughness versus vulnerability</b>							
Boys should always defend themselves even if it means fighting	Boys	(2.0)	(5.1)	(1.0)	(12.8)	(79.1)	< <b>0.001+*</b>
	Girls	(2.9)	(12.3)	(0.5)	(28.4)	(55.9)	
It is important for boys to show they are tough even if they are nervous inside	Boys	(7.2)	(15.3)	(1.5)	(19.9)	(56.1)	0.714
	Girls	(8.3)	(18.6)	(2.0)	(22.1)	(49.0)	
Boys who behave like girls are considered weak	Boys	(8.2)	(16.8)	(2.1)	(16.3)	(56.6)	0.57
	Girls	(7.8)	(11.3)	(2.9)	(16.7)	(61.3)	
Boys should be raised to be tough so can overcome any	Boys	(6.6)	(10.2)	(1.0)	(12.8)	(69.4)	0.2
	Girls	(2.0)	(10.3)	(0.5)	(12.2)	(75.0)	

Gender norms concept	Gender	Responses (%)					p-value
		Disagree a lot	Disagree a little	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree a little	Agree a lot	
difficulties in life							
Girls are expected to be humble	Boys	(3.6)	(8.7)	(1.0)	(15.8)	(70.9)	0.157
	Girls	(7.3)	(13.7)	(1.5)	(16.7)	(60.8)	
Girls should avoid raising their voice to be lady like	Boys	(0.0)	(2.0)	(0.0)	(4.6)	(93.4)	<b>0.034+</b> <b>*</b>
	Girls	(2.0)	(2.0)	(1.0)	(9.2)	(85.8)	
Girls need their parents' protection more than boys.	Boys	(3.1)	(6.1)	(0.5)	(6.1)	(84.2)	0.856
	Girls	(2.9)	(3.9)	(1.0)	(5.9)	(86.3)	
Mean score (1–5, 5 indicating strongest endorsement of stereotypical gender traits) (mean +/- SD)	Boys	4.403 ± 0.527					0.076
	Girls	4.315 ± 0.548					
<b>Stereotypical gender roles</b>							
A woman's role is taking care of her home and family	Boys	(0)	(2.0)	(0.5)	(5.6)	(91.9)	0.015+
	Girls	(2.5)	(6.9)	(1.0)	(5.4)	(84.2)	
Boys and girls should be equally responsible for household chores	Boys	(32.1)	(22.4)	-	(16.3)	(29.2)	<b>0.045*</b>
	Girls	(32.8)	(16.7)	-	(10.3)	(40.2)	
A man should have the final word about decisions in the home	Boys	(2.6)	(6.1)	(1.0)	(12.8)	(77.5)	< <b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	(5.9)	(16.2)	(1.0)	(20.1)	(56.8)	
A woman should obey her husband in all matters	Boys	(2.0)	(18.4)	(1.5)	(27.1)	(51.0)	0.105
	Girls	(6.4)	(23.5)	(2.5)	(22.5)	(45.1)	
Men should be the ones who bring money home for the family, not women	Boys	(5.6)	(10.7)	(1.0)	(10.2)	(72.5)	< <b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	(7.4)	(26.0)	(1.5)	(14.6)	(50.5)	
Mean score (1–5, 5 indicating strongest endorsement of stereotypical gender roles) (mean +/- SD)	Boys	4.191 ± 0.676					< <b>0.001*</b>
	Girls	3.822 ± 0.882					
<b>Sanctions for challenging gender roles</b>							
It is okay to tease a girl who acts like a boy	Boys	(51.1)	(17.3)	(2.0)	(12.8)	(16.8)	0.795
	Girls	(51.5)	(19.6)	(3.4)	(10.3)	(15.2)	
It is okay to tease a boy who acts like a girl	Boys	(33.7)	(11.7)	(0.5)	(14.3)	(39.8)	<b>0.013*</b>
	Girls	(27.0)	(20.1)	(3.9)	(16.2)	(32.8)	

+Monte Carlo simulation. \*Significant

**Table (3)** illustrates the association between the perception of gender norms and other socio-demographic characteristics, the adolescents' age was found to significantly affect only the perception of stereotypical gender roles as the participants' mean age with

more agreement with stereotypical gender roles was 12.6 years compared to 13.1 years for participants with less agreement ( $P = 0.021$ ).

**Table (3)** also; found that there is a significant association between the students' perception of stereotypical gender roles and the students' educational level ( $P < 0.001$ ). Adolescents who are in secondary level (54.5%) have less agreement with stereotypical gender roles than those who are in primary or preparatory levels (30.2%, 34.8%, respectively).

In terms of the parents' educational level and occupation, sexual double standards and stereotypical gender roles were found to be associated with the fathers' educational level and mothers' working status, while the mothers' educational level was found to be associated with stereotypical gender traits and stereotypical gender roles. Students showed more agreement with these gender norms when their parents had lower levels of education and their mothers were employed. Lastly, we did not find a significant association between family structure and the studied gender norms. (**Table 3**)

**Table (3):** Gender norms among the study sample of adolescent students by some socio-demographic factors

Variable	Acceptance of romantic relationships		Sexual double standard		Stereotypical gender traits		Stereotypical gender roles	
	Less agreement (< the peer mean score)	More agreement (≥ the peer mean score)	Less agreement (< the peer mean score)	More agreement (≥ the peer mean score)	Less agreement (< the peer mean score)	More agreement (≥ the peer mean score)	Less agreement (< the peer mean score)	More agreement (≥ the peer mean score)
	(%)	(%)	(%)	N (%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<b>Age</b> Mean +/- SD	12.67 ± 1.67	12.87 ± 1.68	12.58 ± 1.65	12.89 ± 1.69	12.88 ± 1.72	12.70 ± 1.65	13.05 ± 1.77	12.60 ± 1.60
<b>P-value</b>	0.148		0.065		0.395		<b>0.021*</b>	
<b>Educational level of the father</b>								
Illiterate/literacy classes	(58.5)	(41.5)	(26.8)	(73.2)	(34.1)	(65.9)	(12.2)	(87.8)
Basic education	(42.9)	(57.1)	(46.4)	(53.6)	(32.1)	(67.9)	(53.6)	(46.4)
Secondary/technical	(48.0)	(52.0)	(30.5)	(69.5)	(37.9)	(62.1)	(32.2)	(67.8)
University degree/higher	(50.6)	(49.4)	(50.6)	(49.4)	(43.5)	(56.5)	(45.5)	(54.5)
<b>P-value</b>	0.056		<b>0.001*</b>		0.502		<b>&lt; 0.001*</b>	
<b>Educational level of the mother</b>								
Illiterate/literacy	(53.3)	(46.7)	(31.1)	(68.9)	(20.0)	(80.0)	(13.3)	(86.7)

classes								
Basic education	(47.2)	(52.8)	(30.6)	(69.4)	(47.2)	(52.8)	(33.3)	(66.7)
Secondary/technical	(47.2)	(52.8)	(37.8)	(62.2)	(35.8)	(64.2)	(31.6)	(68.4)
University degree/higher	(53.2)	59 (46.8)	(46.0)	(54.0)	(49.2)	(50.8)	(54.0)	(46.0)
<b>P-value</b>	0.967		0.173		<b>0.003*</b>		<b>&lt; 0.001*</b>	
<b>Working status of the father</b>								
Working for cash	(49.7)	(50.3)	(38.9)	(61.1)	(39.2)	(60.8)	(36.3)	(63.7)
Not working for cash/unemployed	(50.0)	(50.0)	(41.7)	(58.3)	(41.7)	(58.3)	(50.0)	(50.0)
<b>P-value</b>	0.986		1.000 <sup>#</sup>		1.000 <sup>#</sup>		0.370 <sup>#</sup>	
<b>Working status of the mother</b>								
Working for cash	(50.8)	(49.2)	(47.5)	(52.5)	(44.9)	(55.1)	(50.8)	(49.2)
Not working for cash/house- wife	(49.3)	(50.7)	(35.5)	(64.5)	(36.9)	(63.1)	(30.9)	(69.1)
<b>P-value</b>	0.776		<b>0.02*</b>		0.133		<b>&lt; 0.001*</b>	
<b>Family structure</b>								
Living with two parents	(49.9)	(50.1)	(39.0)	(61.0)	(40.1)	(59.9)	(37.6)	(62.4)
Other <sup>‡</sup>	(48.5)	(51.5)	(34.4)	(60.6)	(30.3)	(60.7)	(27.3)	(72.7)
<b>P-value</b>	0.879		0.961		0.238		0.238	

#Fisher's exact test \*Significant <sup>‡</sup>Single parent or another caregiver

**Table (4, 5)** show that the association between student's perceptions of gender norms and bullying phenomena, we found that the students' perception regarding hetero-normative relationships, sexual double standard, stereotypical gender traits, and stereotypical gender roles has no significant association with bullying perpetration or victimization.

**Table (4):** Binary logistic regression for gender norm subscales and bullying perpetration among the study participants

Model Variables <sup>®</sup>	B	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Adolescent acceptance of romantic relationships (more agreement)	0.312	1.36 (0.82–2.37)	0.341
Sexual double standard (more agreement)	0.125	1.13 (0.69–1.84)	0.614
Stereotypical gender traits (more agreement)	0.047	1.05 (0.65–1.69)	0.848
Stereotypical gender roles (more agreement)	0.291	1.34 (0.80–2.23)	0.266
Constant	2.345	10.438	0.415

Independent variable is bullying status (0 not bully, 1 bully) <sup>®</sup>All the studied socio-demographic variables (age, gender, etc.) have been controlled in the model Cox & Snell R<sup>2</sup> = 0.116, Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> = 0.159

**Table (5):** Binary logistic regression for gender norm subscales and victimization among the study participants

Model Variables <sup>®</sup>	B	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Adolescent acceptance of romantic relationships (more agreement)	0.301	1.35 (0.87–2.29)	0.381
Sexual double standard (more agreement)	0.139	1.15 (0.71–1.85)	0.568
Stereotypical gender traits (more agreement)	–0.347	0.71 (0.44–1.13)	0.144
Stereotypical gender roles (more agreement)	–0.256	0.77 (0.47–1.27)	0.310
Constant	2.174	8.79	0.442

Independent variable is victimization status (0 not victim, 1 victim)

<sup>®</sup>All the studied sociodemographic variables (age, gender, etc.) have been controlled in the model Cox & Snell R<sup>2</sup> = 0.084, Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> = 0.113

### Discussion:

The need of attending to the social and health needs of adolescents has been recognized by the international development community. Additionally, it has recognized the detrimental effects that unequal gender norms have on youth of both sexes. Thus, it's critical to assess the different aspects of gender norms, particularly for early adolescents, who ought to be given priority in plans to advance gender equality <sup>(9)</sup>. The present study used gender norms scales, which are part of the GEAS measures that were developed to be cross-cultural measures, thus it could be used to monitor and compare gender norms across time and space and help in following global progress towards achieving the United Nations' 5th Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality by 2030 <sup>(23)</sup>.

These gender norm scales addressed a variety of topics, including the promotion of traditional gender roles and behaviors, sexual double standards, and hetero-normative romantic relationships. Students of both sexes did not differ in their acceptance of hetero-normative romantic partnerships among the adolescents who participated; nevertheless, boys were marginally more tolerant of romantic relationships than girls. This is consistent with findings from the GEAS conducted in Shanghai and Indonesia, which showed that males were more inclined to approve of romantic relationships during adolescence <sup>(24, 25)</sup>. Likewise, the current findings agree with Vu et al., (2017) <sup>(26)</sup> study in Uganda, which tested an adapted GEM scale on young adolescents, and came to the conclusion that boys exhibit more equitable attitudes about relationships than girls in adolescence.

Moreau et al., (2019) <sup>(20)</sup> study indicated that the sexual double standard, which suggests that boys and girls have different social statuses in romantic relationships, begins early in adolescence and is prevalent in all countries. More specifically found that girls scored higher than boys on the sexual double standard scale. This pattern was also observed in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo <sup>(27)</sup>, where girls were more likely to indicate agreement with a sexual double standard regarding boy/girl relationship. This consistent pattern means that girls have more conservative views about relationships than boys, as they agree more with the sexual double standard subscale and is less accepting romantic relationships during adolescence. Therefore, more research is required to explore the different views boys and girls have regarding their expectations

from romantic relationships in adolescence and to examine whether girls' more cautious view is related to them experiencing unequal relationships or to generally show the two genders socialize.

Regarding stereotypical gender traits, our results indicated that there was no significant difference between the sexes, but that over half of the boys and girls who took part in the study agreed more with stereotypical gender traits about female vulnerability and male toughness, and that boys were more likely to support stereotypical gender traits than girls. On the one hand, the GEAS's findings support this <sup>(24)</sup>, which indicated that more than half of the adolescents agreed with the statements on stereotypical gender traits, except for "boys should always defend themselves even if it means fighting" (48% agreed) and "boys who behave like girls are considered weak" (43% agreed), and boys, generally, showed higher endorsement on norms that indicate boys' toughness over girls' vulnerabilities.

This was observed in other localities such as the following: Flanders, Belgium and Cuenca, and Ecuador <sup>(28)</sup>. On the other hand, most adolescents in Shanghai rejected stereotypical gender traits, but boys were also more likely to endorse stereotypical gender traits than girls <sup>(25)</sup>. The present study findings of stereotypical gender roles regarding household decisions and division of labor and responsibilities showed that boys were more likely to support stereotypical gender roles than girls. Similarly, more than half of early adolescents in Indonesia supported stereotypical gender roles, but boys showed higher endorsement of males' authority in the household than girls <sup>(24)</sup>. Contrary to that, most of early adolescents in Shanghai refused stereotypical gender roles <sup>(25)</sup>.

The last items addressed in the gender norms scales were about negative social repercussions for challenging gender roles, where 51% of participated students agreed that it was okay to tease a boy who acted like a girl, and 27.5% agreed that it was okay to tease a girl who acted like a boy. In contrast, only 18% of adolescents in Indonesia approved of teasing behaviors against adolescents with atypical gendered behavior <sup>(24)</sup>. This suggests that adolescents with atypical gendered behavior might be more prone to peer violence as it was reported in some studies that adolescents non-conformant to the stereotypical gender norms are often excluded and bullied <sup>(29, 30)</sup>. However, by investigating the association between gender norms and bullying behavior, our study results showed that the students' perception of the studied gender norms does not affect the students' status of bullying and victimization.

Finally, the study's findings about the relationship between the perception of gender norms and certain socio-demographic traits revealed that students' support for stereotypical gender roles, stereotypical gender traits, and a sexual double standard declines as mothers' levels of education and employment increase. Numerous studies have documented the beneficial impact of a working mother and the mother's education on gender norms for both boys and girls <sup>(31, 32)</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

In this study, both boys and girls begin to perceive a variety of stereotyped norms and features, as well as unequal gender norms pertaining to gender interactions, early in adolescence. However, girls are more prone to feel that there is a sexual double standard in respect to boy/girl interactions, whereas males are more likely to embrace hetero-normative relationships among teenagers and to support stereotyped gender roles and behaviors. Furthermore, boys are more likely than girls to condone deviant gender

practices; yet, neither group's understanding of gender norms is associated with bullying or victimization.

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