



## Commentary

## It Begins at 10: How Gender Expectations Shape Early Adolescence Around the World



Robert W. Blum, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., Kristin Mmari, Dr.P.H., M.A.<sup>\*</sup>, and Caroline Moreau, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.

*Department of Population, Family, and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland*

The period of adolescence (ages 10–19 years) is one of the most critical periods of human development as the health and well-being at this age influences health trajectories with lifelong consequences. While considered among the healthiest period of the lifespan, the period of early adolescence (ages 10–14 years) is also a transitional period in which many health behaviors are acquired. However, this has been greatly overlooked. To address this gap, in the fall of 2011, a group of six research teams met in Dakar, Senegal, to begin conceptualizing a study focused on early adolescents. A year earlier, the World Health Organization convened an expert committee to specifically identify the priorities for adolescent health; and the paucity of research on early adolescence was identified as a primary gap. In Dakar, gender inequalities and their consequences for sexual and reproductive health and health more broadly emerged as top priorities. Over the nearly 4 years that followed, the initial group of country collaborators grew to 15 from across five continents (Ecuador, Bolivia, Belgium, Scotland, United States, South Africa, Malawi, Kenya, DR Congo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Egypt, Vietnam, China, and India).

At that time, there was little understanding of or prior research on how to conceptualize or measure key constructs related to gender norms, relationships, sexuality, and empowerment in early adolescence. To better understand the gendered transitions from childhood to adolescence we decided to start the Global Early Adolescent Study by asking young people and their parents about their experiences of

growing up as a boy or girl in their communities. Grounded in the voices of young people and parents, the present special supplement captures some of the cross cutting themes about these transitions across locations and continents. What did we hear?

1. The hegemonic myth: There is a global set of forces from schools, parents, media, and peers themselves that reinforce the hegemonic myths that girls are vulnerable and that boys are strong and independent. Even in sites where parents acknowledged the vulnerability of their sons, they focus on protecting their daughters.
2. Pubertal girls are the embodiment of sex and sexuality: Around the world pubertal boys are viewed as predators and girls as potential targets and victims. Messages such as—do not sit like that, do not wear that, do not talk to him, boys will ruin your future—support the gender division of power and affect while promote sex segregation to preserve girl's sexuality. In some places, girls come to internalize these norms to even a greater extent than boys.
3. Cover up and do not go out: As a consequence of adult perceptions of female sexual vulnerability, in nearly every site, girls' mobility is far more restricted than for boys. As one girl in Assuit, Egypt noted: "A girl cannot go out as she wishes because she is a girl and if a girl came home late her parents would shout at her, but it is okay for a guy."
4. Boys are trouble: Because of adult concerns about their sexual vulnerability, girls are repeatedly told to stay away from boys and there are sanctions if they do not—punishment, social isolation, sexual rumor, and innuendo. Both boys and girls lament this situation. They played together as children and were friends, but now with puberty, those friendships are no longer legitimate.
5. Both boys and girls are aware of gender nonconforming peers: Young people (as well as a number of parents) spoke of peers whose interests, appearance, dress, and/or appearance was more typical of the opposite sex than their own. For such young people, there were significant sanctions and pressures

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Disclaimer:** Publication of this article was funded by the World Health Organization through support from the Packard Foundation and United States Agency for International Development. Additional support came from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The opinions or views expressed in this supplement are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funders.

<sup>\*</sup> Address correspondence to: Kristin Mmari, Dr.P.H., M.A., Department of Population, Family, and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.

*E-mail addresses:* [kmmari@jhsph.edu](mailto:kmmari@jhsph.edu); [bnicoter@jhsph.edu](mailto:bnicoter@jhsph.edu) (K. Mmari).

to conform to what is seen as gender-appropriate behaviors; and our quantitative data suggest that boys are even less tolerant of such peers than girls.

Gender norms and beliefs have significant implications for both girls and boys. The consequences for girls in many parts of the world include child marriage, early school leaving, pregnancy, HIV and sexually transmitted infection risk, violence exposure, and depression. But despite popular perceptions boys are not unscathed. As a result of these hegemonic norms, they engage in and are the victims of physical violence to a much greater extent than girls; they die more frequently from unin-

tentional injuries, are more prone to substance abuse and suicide; and as adults their life expectancy is shorter than that of women. Such differences are socially not biologically determined. As young people grow up to become men and women, they engage with and construct their own gender-based their understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl. This process is amenable to change by fostering gender equitable approaches that have the potential to improve the well-being of adolescent boys and adolescent girls in the short and long terms. That is the challenge ahead of us but first let us listen carefully to what young people and their parents and guardians are telling us.