



Editorial

A Global Perspective on Gender Roles and Identity



Among the social determinants that affect the health and well-being of young people throughout the world, gender is a pivotal influence, with both subtle and overt, immediate as well as longer term influences on adolescent development, resources and opportunities, and ultimately, adolescent and adult health. Most societies are profoundly gendered; these gender roles and expectations affect nearly every aspect of life from infancy onward. They contribute to health disparities that are noted between genders across the life course and in every country throughout the world.

The processes by which gender identities and roles are communicated and reinforced for young people have been considered within a number of theories, with varying levels of empirical support [1]. However, even Bussey and Bandura's social cognitive theory of gender development has been documented primarily in research from high-income countries, notably in North America. The research has focused on gender identity development in early childhood and gendered influences on health differences and social roles in later adolescence, but very little captures gender role development during early adolescence. Much of the work notes the differences in gendered attributes and roles [2], without truly capturing the detailed processes by which those gender roles and gender stereotypes actually influence beliefs and behaviors, especially across different cultures.

The work in this supplement fills these important gaps in the literature. The Global Early Adolescent Study focuses on developmental issues of younger adolescents, age 10 to 14 years, in 15 different high-, middle-, and low-income countries across the world. Equally importantly, this study focuses on adolescents within low-income settings in each of these countries, to capture relatively unexplored contexts for gender identity development. As some of the first work to emerge from this important study of early adolescence, the papers in this supplement offer a fascinating look into key aspects of development during the intensification of gender socialization and gender roles that occurs around puberty. This study is

being undertaken in two phases, with the first designed as an exploratory qualitative examination of how gender is experienced across the various settings, identifying cross-cutting themes, and the second phase intended to incorporate a longitudinal quantitative design.

This supplement includes detailed methodological overviews of the first phase of the study, both in a first paper describing the overall qualitative methods within and across each country [3] as well as an extended example of an analytical approach undertaken in some of the work [4]. Some of the papers focus on two-country comparisons: for example, one describes the process of learning gender norms among young adolescents in low-income urban areas in Delhi, India, and Shanghai, China [5]. A second paper compares gender norms about early adolescent friendships in Egypt and Belgium [6]. Another of the papers focuses on both youth and parental reactions to puberty in two countries, Kenya and Nigeria, as both a cross-cultural and intergenerational comparison [7]. Beyond two-country comparisons, one of the papers focuses on a more complex cross-cultural exploration of how gender norms influence early adolescent romantic relationships in low-income areas of five cities: Baltimore, Cuenca, Edinburgh, Ghent, and Nairobi [8]. A final paper examines the consequences of challenging gender norms in low-income urban areas in middle-income countries (Delhi, India, and Shanghai, China) as well as high-income countries (Baltimore, U.S., and Ghent, Belgium) [9]. The supplement is rounded out by three commentaries, one from the study principal investigators summarizing the key points across the different settings [10], one from the World Health Organization and other sponsors of the study about the implications of these first findings [11], and another from the government and foundation donors who funded the study and supported this supplement [12].

Together the papers within this supplement offer rich and innovative glimpses inside the transitions of early adolescence and the processes by which gender socialization influences development, opportunities, and health in urban areas in several countries around the world. They contribute important insights into the nearly universal presence of some gender norms, even in countries that generally consider themselves to have high levels of gender equity, as well as observations unique to specific cities. As a result, they underscore the importance of context in shaping the way gender is learned, enforced, and reinforced among adolescents, and the health inequities that can emerge as a result of these social forces.

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Elizabeth Saewyc, Ph.D., R.N.
School of Nursing
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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