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“A Boy Would Be Friends With Boys ... and a Girl ... With Girls”: Gender Norms in Early Adolescent Friendships in Egypt and Belgium



Ghada Al-Attar, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.^{a,*}, Sara De Meyer, M.A.^b, Oaima El-Gibaly, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.^a,
 Kristien Michielsen, Ph.D.^b, Lydia H. Animoso, M.S.P.H.^c, and Kristin Mmari, Dr.P.H., M.A.^c

^a Public Health and Community Medicine Department, Faculty of Medicine, Assiut University, Assiut, Egypt

^b International Centre for Reproductive Health (ICRH), Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

^c Population, Family & Reproductive Health Department, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: A gender analysis was conducted to illuminate the key elements of friendships highlighted by early adolescent girls and boys in two sites for the purpose of better understanding the impact of gender norms on adolescent friendships in different contexts.

Methods: Narrative interviews with early adolescents were conducted in two sites: Assiut, Egypt (n = 37) and Ghent, Belgium (n = 30). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and coded using Atlas.ti for analysis.

Results: In both Assiut and Ghent, early adolescents reported some similarities in defining key characteristics of their same-sex friends as well as in the activities they share. However, differences were noticed among boys and girls within each site. In addition, the scope of shared activity was broader in Ghent than in Assiut. In both sites, few opposite-sex friendships were reported. Gender norms influenced choice of friends as well as the type and place of shared activities.

Conclusions: Building on knowledge that adolescent friendships guide and reinforce attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that impact immediate and long-term health, our findings indicate that gender norms inform early adolescent friendships, which may impact healthy development.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

While it is well known that friendships are critical to adolescent development, little is known about the role of gender norms in influencing adolescent friendships. Analysis of narrative interviews with early adolescents reveals that gender norms inform friendship patterns, which in turn drive more or less healthy attitudes and behaviors.

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* Address correspondence to: Ghada Al-Attar, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D., Public Health & Community Medicine Department, Assiut University, Assiut, Egypt 71515.

E-mail address: galattar20@gmail.com (G. Al-Attar).

Adolescence is a time of socialization and identity formation [1], during which peers' increasing influence informs individual values and behaviors [2,3], with long-lasting health impact [4,5]. With the onset of puberty ushering in profound cognitive and physical changes during early adolescence, personal gender attitudes intensify, as do social expectations about gender norms [6]. Gender norms and gender attitudes are thought to play an important role in determining health outcomes, as patterns of sex-differential morbidity and mortality emerge in early adolescence [7,8]. Parents and peers are central to the development of adolescents' gender attitudes worldwide [9]. Peer

relationships are especially salient as adolescents age [10]. Peers become increasingly influential and inform individual values and behaviors. Friend choice is key in determining an adolescent's involvement in or avoidance of risk behavior [11,12], for example, smoking [13], alcohol consumption, marijuana use, tobacco chewing, and sexual debut [14], body mass index and physical activity [15]. In addition, being popular among adolescent peers increases the chances of educational attainment and employment in young adulthood [16].

This article presents a gender analysis of in-depth interviews with early adolescents conducted in Assiut and Ghent focused on understanding key components of friendship, conducted as part of the Global Early Adolescent Study, a 15-country investigation of factors in early adolescence that predispose young people to health risks and promote healthy development. Assiut is a large city in a Muslim-majority country (Egypt), and Ghent, Belgium is home to a large immigrant population from Muslim-majority countries. Research concerning early adolescents in Egypt has focused on academic and health outcomes but not on the role of gender norms in peer relationships or the influence of gender norms or friendship on health [17]. Immigrant youth in Ghent and their friends present unique needs due to the mix of cultural influences, which are not well understood [18]. The primary research questions we were interested in addressing are:

- (1) What similarities and differences do early adolescent girls and boys report concerning friendship in Assiut and Ghent?
- (2) Do gender norms influence girls' and boys' friendships in Assiut and Ghent, and, if so, in what ways?

Methods

Data were gathered from 32 interviews among male adolescents and 35 female adolescents, aged 10–14 years, living in poor, semiurban areas in Assiut and Ghent. Inclusion criteria were standardized across both sites. Most adolescents were 12 years old. Nearly all adolescents were living with both parents in Assiut versus two thirds in Ghent. As for ethnicity, there were five Belgian, eight Maghreb, and 12 Turkish adolescents among others in Ghent. See Table 1 for a description of participant characteristics.

Recruitment strategies were nearly the same in both sites with slight differences. In both sites, eligible families or participants were recruited through organizations working with adults and adolescents in low-income areas. In Assiut, a middle-aged female field coordinator recruited additional adolescents and their parents via household visits. In Ghent, additional participants were recruited from a primary school and a health care center located in a low-income area of the city. In Assiut, four families declined to participate after being recruited versus one in Ghent.

At both sites, the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and privacy and confidentiality expectations were explained in detail during the recruitment procedure and/or before the start of the interview. Afterward, upon acceptance of the invitation, parents/caregivers provided informed written consent for themselves and for their children, and adolescents provided informed written assent. The research protocol was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board and the ethical committees of Assiut Faculty of Medicine and of Ghent University Hospital.

Recordings were transcribed verbatim then translated from Arabic (Assiut) and Dutch (Ghent) into English. In Assiut,

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants

Characteristics	Assiut, Egypt	Ghent, Belgium
Sex		
Male	20	12
Female	17	18
Age		
10	4	0
11	5	9
12	14	11
13	12	10
14	2	0
Race/ethnicity	N/A	
Belgian		5
Turkish		12
Maghreb		8
Other		5
Family structure		
Two parents	35	17
Single parent	1	11
Other caregiver	1	2
Education level		
Did not complete primary	18	–
Primary (completed sixth grade)	14	–
Preparatory (seventh–ninth grade)	5	–
Fifth grade primary school	–	5
Sixth grade primary school	–	8
First grade secondary school	–	17
Language	Arabic	Dutch

transcriptionists were male and female research assistants with medical and social science backgrounds. Translators were medical and pharmacy faculty recent graduates. In Ghent, transcription was done by male and female bilingual (Dutch and English) undergraduate and graduate students in language studies. Translations in both sites were randomly checked for quality by the principal investigators. The transcripts were coded using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti (Cincom Systems, Inc., Berlin, Germany) [19] and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach [20]. Methodology details are described in the article by Mmari et al. [21] in this Journal's supplement.

Results

Findings from the analysis are organized into two categories: same-sex friendships and opposite-sex friendships. Same-sex friendship findings are presented by sex and by the key themes identified: defining characteristics of friendships and activities.

Same-sex friendships

The majority of early adolescents in both Assiut and Ghent described primarily same-sex friendships. Defining characteristics of same-sex friendship for girls compared with boys were found to be similar. Differences in the activities that girls and boys typically engage in with same-sex friends were prominent. More similarities than differences were observed within the same-sex friendships of each sex between sites.

Girls' friendships: defining characteristics. In both Assiut and Ghent, girls reported having important friendships with girls who were classmates, neighbors, and family friends. Most early adolescent girls spend most of their time in school in both sites, thus most friends were classmates. Defining characteristics of

same-sex friendships clustered around two subthemes: mutual trust and personal traits.

Mutual trust. Girls in both Assiut and Ghent reported that friendship means being able to trust one another with personal and private information. Girls reported sharing their own “secrets” and to be entrusted with their friends’ secrets. An 11-year-old girl (# 11) in Ghent said, “I’m her real BFF [Best Friend Forever] ... because she shares her biggest secrets with me.”

In Assiut, when trust is broken between female friends, the friendship may be damaged. One 12-year-old girl (# 6) in Assiut described a breach of trust she had experienced, saying, “[I had told her] a secret about my fiancé ... but because of her everyone at school knows.” As a result of this betrayal the friends “stopped telling each other anything.”

Personal traits. Most young girls choose friends with similar traits, which include beliefs about how a girl should behave. In Assiut, friends were often described as having good manners. Explaining why she loves her best friend, an 11-year-old girl (# 3) in Assiut said, “Because she’s a very polite girl. ... Polite as in she doesn’t do anything wrong. ... We play together and we don’t fight.” An 11-year-old girl (# 11) in Ghent explicitly pointed out the importance of choosing friends based on how they behave as a girl:

She is a girl just like me. You know, sometimes there are these girls that act like boys ... Aren’t boys much tougher and everything, and some girls already act like that and I don’t like that so much.... Because if you are a girl you also have to act like a girl, if you are a boy you also have to act like a boy.

While most participants in Ghent were first- or second-generation immigrants, only one girl cited sharing a native language besides Dutch as an important aspect of her close friendships.

Girls’ friendships: activities. Activities of girls’ same-sex friends cluster around conversation and a range of other activities. For many girls, especially in Assiut, having a limited freedom of movement impacts on the types activities in which girls participate.

Conversation. Girls and boys at both sites report that conversation is among the most important activities girls share with friends. An 11-year-old boy (# 11) in Ghent observed, “I mostly play soccer and things like that. But with those girls it’s talking.” The importance of conversation appears to increase with age. One 13-year-old girl (# 13) in Ghent described how she used to spend most of her time with friends playing games like soccer and tag at the playground but now they just enjoy “sitting, walking, or talking.”

Topics of conversation center on school and include opinions about teachers, schoolwork, and gossip (e.g., romantic intrigue involving other classmates), movies they’ve seen, clothes, and fashion. When school is not in session and there is no face-to-face contact, text messages and social media facilitate communication in both sites. Older girls reported talking about more serious subjects with their friends, for example, menstruation, career aspirations, and problems at home in Ghent, and problems at home and romantic interests in Assiut.

Other activities. In Assiut, it is typical for girls to spend time at friends’ homes studying, sharing food, and playing cards or other

games. In Ghent, girls mentioned doing homework, listening to music, playing games (tag, hide and seek, jump rope, and volleyball), shopping, riding their bicycles, and spending a night at friends’ houses. Some girls in Assiut articulated that gender perceptions drive their decision not to play rough sports, as explained by one 13-year-old girl (# 1):

Interviewer: And do girls do wrestling?

Girl: Absolutely not! Girls shouldn’t wrestle.

Interviewer: Why not?

Girl: We’re not supposed to hit each other.

In Assiut and Ghent, girls and boys reported that girls are limited in the places they can go in ways boys are not. As explained by a 13-year-old boy (# 13) in Ghent:

Boys, they can stay up late, I mean, stay outside and they can see friends a lot ... But girls ... they either have to stay at home ... or sometimes they can walk around with girlfriends during the day or have parties at their girlfriends’ place. ... But, like, really staying up late outside and all, that, no. That’s mostly for boys.

A 13-year-old girl (#1) in Assiut agreed, stating, “A girl cannot go out as she wishes, ‘because she’s a girl,’ and if a girl came home late her parents would ‘shout’ at her, ‘but its ok for a guy.’”

Boys’ friendships: defining characteristics. In both Assiut and Ghent, boys meet their friends at school, in their neighborhood, at sports clubs, or at the mosque. As with girls, most friendships boys described were with classmates. Same-sex friendships among boys were commonly depending on shared values and maintained by defending each other and sharing things.

Shared values. Most boys describe sharing values with their closest friends. In both Assiut and Ghent, boys stated that trust and honesty are critical to their close friendships. A 13-year-old boy (# 13) in Ghent stated that trustworthiness was the sole trait he looked for in a friend, “When you tell him something ... that is a secret, he won’t tell it to someone else.” This finding is very similar to girls’ descriptions of the role of “secrets” in their friendships.

Highlighting the importance of shared values in boys’ friendships, a 13-year-old boy (# 6) in Assiut stated how, among his classmates, there are some he keeps at a distance:

They swear and curse in the worst way and I don’t like that, and I don’t even utter these words They don’t pray or recite the Koran, like even Friday prayer, they sometimes don’t do it; when I ask them for something sometimes they do it and others not. They for example don’t study, but they ask for someone to help them cheat and when they ask me, I say no.

In addition, boys in Assiut mentioned choosing friends whom are kind and emotionally supportive. As a 12-year-old boy (# 7) in Assiut explained, “Like, when I’m just sitting in front of my house, [my friends] would come. If I’m sad they’d make me laugh, and make me become happier.”

Defending and sharing. In both Assiut and Ghent, boys also described an obligation to “defend” their friends. Describing how a good friend defends him, a 12-year-old boy (# 12) in Ghent said, “...for example when someone talks bad about me then he will say things like, ‘If you ever say that again, I will go to the principal.’”

In Assiut, boys also routinely lend their friends money or share belongings. A 13-year-old boy (# 20) explained, “When I don’t have money to get something ... [name of friend] gives it to me and if he doesn’t have money and I have some, I would give him also.”

Boys’ friendships: activities. While boys talk and share secrets with their friends as girls do, the focus of boys’ friendships is on shared activities, with sports being the most common activity both outside of school and during breaks while at school.

A 13-year-old boy (# 13) in Ghent described a typical Friday afternoon with his friends, saying, “Sometimes we go to the movies together, or sometimes ... everyone brings along 10 Euro ... and then after school we do something cool at the [city center].” A 13-year-old boy (# 3) in Assiut also described participating in a variety of activities with friends, saying, “...when we go to pray or play football or marbles or volleyball, we play together, or we discuss stories in the library. Me and one of my best friends ... we would go and borrow a book of stories we like.”

Boys at both sites also report staying out later as they age. A 13-year-old boy (# 13) in Ghent described this, saying, “...when I was 11 years old ... I already went outside, to the park and so on. But then I had to be back at home around 20.30 or something, but [now] ... [my parents] call me when I have to get back home, and mostly that’s around 22.30, more or less.”

In addition, boys and girls in both sites reported that boys have more freedom of movement than girls and less oversight. A 13-year-old girl (# 5) in Assiut stated, a boy can “go out as he wishes ... even if he wants to sleep in the streets.”

Opposite-sex friendships

Boys more frequently reported having opposite-sex friendships compared with girls. A few participants explicitly expressed avoidance of opposite-sex friendships; a 13-year-old girl from Assiut stated, “A boy would be friends with boys like him, and a girl would be friends with girls like her.” A 14-year-old boy (# 15) in Assiut said, “No, I don’t like to befriend girls or hang out with them, or even get to know them.”

Reasons adolescents report for not having opposite-sex friendships include a mismatch in personality style or behavior and lack of shared interests. An 11-year-old girl (# 11) in Ghent stated, “[Boys] are different than us. They want to play different games.”

Finally, adolescents expressed fear that opposite-sex friendship could be misconstrued, either by family or by peers, as romantic in nature. Among their families, adolescents “do not want any problems to arise” concerning the opposite sex. This was especially prominent in Assiut, where one 14-year-old boy (# 9) explained, “Maybe I befriend a girl and someone would see me and would go tell her dad, and problems happen.” In Assiut, girls also fear that befriending boys will damage their reputation, as demonstrated by a 13-year-old girl (# 15) who said of a friend, “I stopped hanging out with her once I saw her going out with a boy. I thought, ‘this is a bad girl,’ I heard about her reputation, and thought, ‘I won’t hang out with her again.’”

In both sites, but more prominently in Ghent, adolescents fear being misunderstood and teased by peers for having an opposite-sex friendship. A 13-year-old boy (# 13) in Ghent said, “Sometimes [my male friends and I] stay with girls ... but then the children say like ... ‘yes, you’re in love’ or whatever, but we’re not actually, we’re just friends. Nothing more.”

As for shared activities, early adolescents in Assiut typically mention working on homework together with their opposite-sex friends after school and occasionally playing. In Ghent, some girls reported having male friends with whom they play games such as tag or football during breaks at school, and one boy reported having a close female friend with whom he plays very imaginative games, which he did not think boys would be as interested in playing. In Ghent, opposite-sex friendships were primarily described as between groups of opposite-sex friends rather than between individuals.

Discussion

Traditional inequitable gender norms and attitudes remain widespread among early adolescents across various cultural contexts [9]. This is also reflected in our findings, which indicate that stereotypical gender norms play a role in early adolescent friendships. Our analysis revealed a paucity of opposite-sex friendships, in line with previous studies [22]. Respondents who reported having important opposite-sex friendships were most often boys, also supporting prior research [23]. Some research suggests that opposite-sex friendships deteriorate during adolescence as romantic interest and relationships emerge [24,25], whereas other researchers argue that adolescents’ romantic relationships may promote opposite-sex friendships [26,27]. More research is needed to understand what impact, if any, opposite-sex friendships have on development of healthy romantic relationships.

Early adolescents in both Assiut and Ghent described their friends in terms that frequently point to the influence of gender norms. At the extremes, girls sought “polite” girls to befriend, while boys sought friends who will support and defend them. The fact that boys seek friends who defend them is in line with other research where adolescents perceive this protection as a value that may strengthen friendship [28]. These traits are consistent with stereotypical femininity and masculinity [29,30]. Adolescents tend to befriend with similar peers. Aggressive boys tend to be friend with aggressive peers due to mutual selection and interests while girls are less likely to express their aggression in an explicit mean [31]. Deviant peer behavior predicts substance use and dependence later in life [32] which may push the child to seek support from unexperienced peers instead of trusted adults [33] especially among boys as family environment is more influential for girls [32]. Exposure of middle school students to frequent verbal or physical peer harassment predicts more aggression, antisocial behavior, and alcohol use later in high school [34]. Gender norms also appear to inform the kinds of activities adolescents engage in with friends. At both sites, girls reported that the primary activity they share with friends is conversation, while boys consistently reported playing sports as their primary activity. Adolescents tend to be friend with peers who share same activities. Students who had similar risk behavior tend to select peers with the same behavior as friends [35]. Implementing early adolescent multicomponent programs and making use of the influence of positive social peer relationships may prevent risky behavior and promote healthy behaviors among early adolescents [32]. The gender differences in activities were more pronounced in Assiut than in Ghent.

Nearly 10 years ago it was observed that, “During adolescence, the world expands for boys and contracts for girls.” [36] Our findings illustrate that girls’ limited mobility and boys’ freedom remain highly pertinent issues. Girls’ restricted movement may be

explained by parental fear for girls' sexual safety and related protection of the family's status, which is common in the Middle East and among some groups of immigrants in Western Europe [37]. This constricted spatial mobility of girls is linked to restricted knowledge and power [38] and can have profound health implications for girls in the form of more susceptibility to sexual violence and poor access to reproductive health services, in addition to loss of prestige especially among poor families [39]. Our findings indicate that early adolescent girls in Assiut and Ghent are affected by limitations on mobility, reflected in the locations where they share activities with friends, with girls in Assiut reporting greater limitation in mobility than girls in Ghent. More research is needed to understand boys' unrestricted movement and lack of parental oversight, reported in both Assiut and Ghent, which may, too, have health consequences.

As with most qualitative research, sample size makes generalizability difficult to all early adolescents in Assiut or Ghent. Participants represent poor, semiurban populations and may differ from other populations and those who chose not to participate in the study.

Early adolescents in Assiut and Ghent both report having more same- than opposite-sex friends and describe similar defining characteristics of friendship. Gender norms influence the type and location of activities friends engage in for girls and boys at both sites, but more prominently in Assiut than Ghent. Friendships are critical to healthy development, and more research is needed to better understand how gender norms influence early adolescents' friendships, with implications for a range of social and health outcomes. Friends could encourage or protect their peers from risk behaviors [13]. Friendship could be used in school interventions to promote adolescent health and well-being through designing campaigns that adopt healthy behavior among peers.

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