‘Yea, I’ve grown; I can’t go out anymore’: Perceived risks for girls and boys entering adolescence

Introduction

The influence of gender norms is becoming increasingly recognized as one of the most critical social determinants of the health of adolescents. Early adolescence (ages 10-14) has been recognized as an important but understudied developmental period (Blum et al., 2014). This transitional period is a time during which adolescents’ understanding and espousal of gender norms solidify and start to shape health outcomes (Igras et al., 2014). Gender norms and gender socialization at this age may contribute to diverging risks for boys and girls. In prior qualitative work in the United States, early adolescent girls associated pubertal maturation with readiness for romantic involvement and sexual activity (O’Sullivan et al., 2000), and voiced concerns about sexual assault (Denner & Dunbar, 2004). Gendered messages received by boys during early adolescence, on the other hand, may in some settings emphasize toughness and aggression as appropriate displays of masculinity (Mora, 2012). While emerging risks during this developmental period are likely to be gendered, the research in this area is limited, particularly with respect to settings outside of the United States.

In this paper, we draw on qualitative interviews conducted among early adolescents and their parents in six diverse urban settings across the world—Assiut (Egypt), Baltimore (USA), Ghent (Belgium), Ile Ife (Nigeria), Nairobi (Kenya), and Shanghai (China)—to compare the perceived risks associated with entering adolescence among parents and adolescents and explore how these risks differ by gender.

Methods

Data
The present study is based on data from the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), which aims to understand the factors in early adolescence that predispose young people to sexual health risks and conversely that promote healthy sexuality so as to provide the information needed to promote sexual and reproductive wellbeing. The GEAS is implemented by a collaboration of university-based and non-government institutions from 15 cities: Assiut (Egypt), Baltimore (USA), Blantyre (Malawi), Cape Town (South Africa), Cochabamba (Bolivia), Cuenca (Ecuador), Edinburgh (Scotland), Ghent (Belgium), Hanoi (Vietnam), Ilé Ifé (Nigeria), Kinshasa (DRC), Nairobi (Kenya), New Delhi (India), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), and Shanghai (China). The choice of these cities was largely influenced by existing research relationships between the research team but in addition they represent major and geographically diverse urban areas with sizable economically disadvantaged populations.

**Sampling**

A purposive sampling frame was used to select the adolescents and their parents/caregivers in all 15 sites. Male and female adolescents, aged 11-13 years old, who lived in the selected cities and who had a legal guardian, were invited to participate in the study. In some sites, the research team used community-based organizations to help them recruit the adolescent and parent sample, while in other sites, schools were used as the primary venue for sample selection.

**Data Collection**

Data collection began in the summer of 2014, and is still ongoing in some sites. To date, a total of 894 interviews have been conducted, of which 468 were among adolescents. Across all 15 sites, identical research protocols were used, which included individually interviewing approximately 30 adolescent and parent/caregiver dyads (separately). Previous to the adolescent
interviews, as a way of building trust, group interviews were conducted in conjunction with a timeline exercise. A timeline is a participatory research methodology in which small groups of four to five young adolescents are asked to draw the important events of a typical person’s life on a timeline – starting from birth until adulthood. Follow-up questions are then asked to examine gender differences (i.e., what events might be different between boys and girls) and further explore the perceptions of what is considered adolescence and markers of adolescence.

To ensure that researchers followed the same research protocol across sites, members of the research team from each site attended a training-of-trainers workshop and used a standardized training manual. Consent procedures were also standardized across sites. Written consent was obtained by using a combined written parental/guardian consent and child assent form. All research protocols were approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health IRB, and subsequently at each site’s human ethics review committee.

Analysis

All recordings were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and uploaded in Atlas.ti (Scientific Software, Berlin; version 7). Translations were checked for quality by the local PI at each site, who conducted random ‘quality checks’ by comparing the English and the local language transcriptions side by side. Once all the translated transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, 2012) was used, where the qualitative investigators from each site first read the transcripts to identify the primary themes that were emerging. An initial core set of codes was then developed by the lead qualitative investigator and shared with all the qualitative investigators across the sites. As more transcripts were read across sites, the core set of codes was revised until a final set of codes was achieved. This core set of codes was used for the initial coding schemes across sites; within each
site, additional sub-codes were created that were site specific. At each site, two researchers coded the transcripts using an incremental, step-wise process, which first involved applying the core set of codes and then developing more analytical sub-codes. At each of these steps, a comparison of the codes within each coding team revealed if there were coder discrepancies; any discrepancies that did occur were discussed with the lead qualitative investigator from that site until consensus could be achieved. Coding concluded when all the data was assigned to a code, and saturation was achieved (Denzin, 1978). To compare the codes across sites, matrices of the key codes were created to examine patterns, not only within a site, but also across sites and participant groups.

**Findings**

*As girls enter puberty, their risks to their sexual and reproductive health sharply increase*

When adolescents and parents were asked about the risks that take place as children enter adolescence, across every site except Belgium, girls are perceived to face far greater challenges compared to boys. Adolescent girls, for example, described that once their bodies started changing, they were no longer ‘free’ to live like boys. Instead, risks related to pregnancy, sexual harassment, and rape were frequently discussed with the notion that boys could no longer be trusted around them.

*For you to be a girl, you must observe the following: one, you should not be moving with boys; you should not be wearing clothes that are too tight because the boys are promiscuous. They will be observing you until they rape such a girl before they relent. That is what I know about boys in this town. (Adolescent female, Ile Ife)*

*Well (when body changed), I had to be more responsible for my body because different people – I know what they are capable of. My mom taught me, like raping and all that stuff, so I have to be careful and cautious when I am around like - if I am outside or anything. Because this world is cruel, and you never know what will happen. (Adolescent female, Baltimore)*
Parents across every site, in fact, described how raising a girl during this stage was especially worrisome and many felt that boys were much easier as they were able to protect themselves.

Comparing girls with boys, as parents, we have more concern for girls. Because after all, the society is very complicated. As the common saying goes, ‘the boy won’t get hurt no matter what he does in the outside’, while for the girl, it is a different story. That is why we worry more for our daughter. (Shanghai parent)

...It’s not like you wouldn’t trust your daughters, but it seems to me as if a boy is better capable in protecting himself. (Ghent parent)

Among both adolescents and parents, girls were generally viewed to be physically weaker than boys and consequently were more at risk of ‘rape’ and ‘kidnapping.’ To protect girls from such risks, both parents and adolescents felt that not only must they be careful about what they wear, but they also needed to be restricted from leaving their homes or walking in the communities by themselves. A poignant quote from a girl in Assiut summarizes this sentiment:

Now, I look at myself in the mirror. I say to myself, ‘yeah, I’ve grown. I can’t go out anymore.”

Notably, both parents and adolescents felt that it was up to the girl to dress responsibly and to be more cautious to avoid risks related to rape and harassment.

It is not as hard as it would be if I was younger, because now that I am older we got to deal with what you wear, where you go, who you with... because you have to wear certain stuff a thug or man looks at your face or asks you out or just walk up to you and try to talk to you before they even know what they are doing wrong. I can’t go everywhere by myself because a lot of men like find me attractive, so my mother tells me I can’t really go places by myself. (Adolescent female, Baltimore)

Adolescents and parents in Assiut, Shanghai, Ile Ife, and Nairobi also felt that when a girl enters puberty, she should stop having boys as friends and only have girls as friends.
To be a girl, you shouldn’t be seen roaming around in the company of the boys in the community because you never know what they are planning for you. (Adolescent female, Nairobi).

A bad girl (with a bad reputation) is one that goes to talk to boys, stands with boys, or call a boy in phone (Assiut parent).

Interesting, when comparing the risks associated with girl’s puberty across sites, there were a few site-specific risks. In Baltimore, for example, there were several parents who were particularly worried about their girls becoming gay. One mother felt that girls were at risk because they were growing up without fathers or had mothers who were not at home long enough and consequently were turning to other girls ‘for love.’ Another mother just felt there were too many ‘gay girls’:

*I really think the main thing in this generation is these gay girls. There are so many gay girls out there. And it is confusing for the girls that are not gay….These gay girls, they know how to turn these young girls on, there are too many of them out there and unless they have experienced it, they want to see what it feels like and try it.*

In Shanghai, several parents felt that girls faced higher pressures to perform well in school, in comparison to boys, in part because of the traditional stereotype of girls being less intelligent and more easily ‘distracted’ in academics. One mother shared this sentiment well:

*Girls seem to have a higher expectation on themselves. So, they will have more pressures on themselves... Many of his [son’s] female classmates have higher pressure on studies since they think they will not catch up with a boy’s school performance.*

Additionally, while parents across sites mentioned the Internet as being a major source of negative influence on both boys and girls, parents from Shanghai felt that girls were particularly vulnerable to it when they became adolescents. Given that many described not knowing how to control what was being posted, there was a fear that the Internet could negatively influence girls’ behaviors and subsequently their health.
Chinese traditional culture is to praise virtue and punish vice, but it [the internet] is doing the opposite things.... When you absorb some information, you will absorb a lot of rubbish (Shanghai parent).

**For boys entering adolescence, increased risks to violence and drugs emerge**

While girls faced increased risks to their sexual and reproductive health as they entered adolescence, boys became prone to fighting, smoking, and using drugs and alcohol.

*Young men like us get themselves in things like sniffing glue and MSI [fuel from an airplane]. They buy it at a petrol and put it on a piece of cloth and sniff...when their parents try to stop them, they say it’s their own problem, and not their parent’s problem. (Adolescent male in Nairobi)*

*For the boys, they will start keeping friends, they will start drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and taking Indian hemp. They will start going to parties and roaming about; they become wayward and start keeping bad friends (Ife Ife parent)*

In both Baltimore and Shanghai, many parents felt that boys were much more influenced by the neighborhood in comparison to girls. For example, one Baltimore mother noted how many boys were getting shot in the city because of what they were learning and observing on the streets.

Another father in Baltimore summarized it by explaining both the family and the neighborhood influences:

*Growing up in a city is a lot more challenging because now you got so much peer pressure coming from so many different things where you know, like it is so easy for a young male to get side tracked, especially if they don’t have a role model for a mother or father, because nowadays moms have to be a father too, if the father is not present. So, in turn, they are looking for a male figure to look up and they might get side tracked by the guy out there doing no good.*

Additionally, given the freedom and independence that boys had, parents in Assuit actually felt that boys were more prone to the negative influence of the Internet in comparison to girls.

*What concerns is when it comes to boys and the Internet. As in when [my son] gets older and befriends other guys, the Internet ruins the boys more than girls, because a girl is her mom’s friend, so she’s obedient. But a boy likes to be out in the streets (Assiut parent).*
While girls were not allowed to associate with boys when they approached puberty, it was interesting that among adolescents and parents alike, there was not only indifference about boys having friends who were girls, but there was also more tolerance among parents for boys having girlfriends.

*In the end, it is the girls who pay more prices when bad things happen than the other way around. There is less loss for the boy – in a male-female relationship, the girl will suffer more losses than the boy.* (Shanghai parent)

*These days I’d be concerned about girls more, whoever has an older son, I don’t know, I feel like I’d be more worried about girls because she’d get hurt at the end, and would cause distress to her parents.* (Assiut parent).

### Discussion

This paper aimed to compare the risks among boys and girls as they entered adolescence across six diverse urban settings. Overwhelmingly, girls were perceived to face many more risks to their health in comparison to boys. With the exception of Ghent, parents and adolescents agreed that when a girl’s body starts to develop, her risks for sexual harassment, rape, kidnapping, and pregnancy sharply rise. As a result, freedom and independence greatly diminish, as parents felt that because of girls’ ‘weakness’ and ‘vulnerability’, they needed more restrictions. In Assiut, parents also wanted to restrict their daughters’ freedom and mobility because they needed to protect her reputation within the community. In contrast, when boys became adolescents, their independence broadened, as parents felt that boys were now able to protect themselves. This has consequences as well, as boys were perceived to be more prone to risks associated with street violence and peer pressure.

If we look at these patterns across sites, it was startling to find how similar these gendered risks were across sites. Ghent was the one exception, where risks related to sexual and
reproductive health, as well as violence and substance use, appeared to be equally distributed between boys and girls. To place these findings in context, gender equality and gender mainstreaming were introduced in Belgium’s public institutions since the 1980s and the government has focused on monitoring gender equality and gender discrimination throughout all sectors (Worldbank, 2015). Whether this concentrated focus on gender in Belgium is the reason for why there were fewer gender differences in Ghent is not clear, but it is notable that it is the only site that has a federal office dedicated to tracking equality between males and females.

Given that all adolescents in this study were only aged 11-13 years old, this study demonstrates that the influence of gender norms and related risks to being a boy and a girl start early on in adolescent development. The fact that girls across very different cultural settings face similar restrictions on their freedom and mobility as a result of their perceived vulnerability has potential implications for their future ‘social’ spaces within a society. While boys achieve greater freedom during adolescence, their ‘social space’ widens. Girls, on the other hand, become restricted more to their homes and immediate families. These differences in the perceptions of vulnerability and related mobility have implications for not only the intergenerational perpetuation of gender inequalities, but also for creating power imbalances between males and females at a very early age in development.
References


