**“Gender Stereotypes Are Learned at a Young Age, Global Study Says**

**By Agence France-Presse**

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Gender stereotypes are firmly rooted in today's youth by age 10, according to a global study released last week. Such stereotypes lay out a society's set ideas about the ways boys and girls should behave, look and think about themselves. This can raise the risk of depression, suicide, violence and HIV, the study warns.

The investigation spanned 15 countries. Its results suggest that vast amounts of money are wasted on stereotype prevention programs for teenagers because efforts must begin far earlier.

"Adolescent health risks are shaped by behaviors rooted in gender roles that can be well established in kids by the time they are 10 or 11 years old," lead researcher Kristin Mmari said.

"Yet we see billions of dollars around the world invested in adolescent health programs that don't kick in until they are 15," Mmari said. "By then it's probably too late to make a big difference."

**Study Says Stereotypes Expose Girls to Danger**

The study included 450 early adolescents matched with a parent or guardian.

Interviews were conducted in the following countries: Bolivia, Belgium, Burkina Faso, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Scotland, South Africa, the United States and Vietnam.

Researchers found that gender stereotypes that emphasize female passivity can encourage abuse. Girls are expected to stick close to home and to quietly accept what others tell them to do or do to them.

Such stereotypes expose girls to a host of dangers. They "leave girls at greater risk of dropping out of school or suffering physical and sexual violence, child marriage, early pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections," the report said.

**Boys' Stereotypes Emphasize Strength**

Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to spend time outside of the home, unsupervised, to explore the world.

When it came to relationships, boys were consistently viewed as being the ones allowed to take the first step except in one city — Edinburgh, Scotland.

Meanwhile, girls across the world are taught that their bodies are their key asset.

"In New Delhi, the girls talked about their bodies as a big risk that needs to be covered up," Mmari said. "In Baltimore, girls told us their primary asset was their bodies and that they need to look appealing — but not too appealing," Mmari said.

Boys, too, suffer from stereotypes that emphasize physical strength and independence. Such stereotypes can make them more prone to drug use and more likely to either commit or fall victim to acts of violence.

**Challenging Gender Norms**

The researchers did find increasing acceptance for girls who want to dress or act like boys — particularly in Belgium, China, India and the United States. However, it's harder for boys to challenge gender roles. There is "almost zero tolerance for boys" who push back against typical gender roles, the report said.

"Boys who challenge gender norms by their dress or behavior were by many respondents seen as socially inferior," the report said. They were often bullied, teased and beaten.

The study found that from a very early age children internalize certain myths about girls and boys. Children early on believe girls are weak and helpless, while boys are "strong and independent," researcher Robert Blum said. This was true in all countries studied, from the most conservative to the most liberal.

"And this message is being constantly reinforced at almost every turn," Blum said. Gender stereotypes are perpetuated in every sphere of life, by everyone from family members to classmates, teachers, clergy and coaches.