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Formative phase: motivations to engage in a relationship

- *He does help me with a lot of stuff ... that I go through. He will help me because usually I can't really deal with most of the stuff that go[es] on. Like having trouble at school and the bullying (Baltimore, girl aged 13).*

- *Sometimes there are also boys – and that happens a lot – that say like 'I think it's mega macho to have a sweetheart. So I'm not in love with her but I'm doing it'. (Ghent, boy aged 12)*

Formative phase: stereotypical gender norms regulate interactions

- *I think that a boy should do that [asking a girl out] and if he doesn't have the courage to, then I find that very cowardly... Because otherwise he won't actually stand up for you when something happens.... Because otherwise it's not a boy (Ghent, girl aged 12).*

- *When a boy likes a girl, and he wants her, or he wants to ask her if she wants to be his girlfriend, then you're stressed (Ghent, boy aged 12).*

Formative phase: Peer and parental pressures

- *She started flirting with a boy, I told her “stop flirting, just go for it, just ask him out if you really like him” (Edinburgh, girl aged 12).*
- *She sometimes says like ‘Yeah, all boys are the same and they all have the same things in mind. They tell you that they like you but they use you just as ‘someone in between’ or so... And when they leave or so, they break your heart...’ (Ghent, girl aged 12)*

Negative context of romantic relationship

- *They [boys] could be really good looking but they could abuse you. They could do something really badly (Edinburgh, girl aged 12).*

Conclusions

Few adolescents engage in romantic relationships in early adolescents but boys are more likely to report these experiences than girls

Stereotypical gender norms about romantic relationships prevail across cultural settings, depicting boys as romantically/sexually active and dominant, and girls as innocent with less (romantic) agency.

In all countries heterosexuality was perceived to be the norm. Nevertheless, some adolescents were supportive of same sex relations