

The relationship between gender segregation and romantic love myths among adolescents

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KEYWORDS

Socio-emotional learning
Sexism
Gender stereotypes
Peer relationships
Gender-based violence

ABSTRACT

Romantic love myths and gender segregation of peer relationships are two variables that are considered risk factors for the occurrence of episodes of gender-based violence in adolescence, but despite this there are no studies that relate both variables. The sample consisted of 911 adolescents aged 13-17 years ($M = 15.2$; $SD = 1.4$), 54% of whom were girls, completed a sociometric questionnaire and the *Love Myths Scale*. A multivariate analysis was performed with two factors: gender and gender segregation, and romantic love myths as dependent variables. Main effects were found, especially for the gender variable, and interaction effects, indicating that it is boys in segregated relationships who obtain the highest scores on the ambivalence myths, which relate love with aggression. Romantic love myths persist among adolescents, and gender segregation has particularly negative effects on boys. All this makes it necessary to continue implementing educational actions on equality, especially with adolescents.

La relación entre la segregación por género y los mitos del amor romántico en adolescentes

PALABRAS CLAVE

Aprendizaje socioemocional
Sexismo
Estereotipos de género
Relaciones entre iguales
Violencia de género

RESUMEN

Los mitos del amor romántico y la segregación por género de las relaciones con los iguales son dos variables que se consideran factores de riesgo para la aparición de episodios de violencia de género en la adolescencia, pero a pesar de ello no existen estudios que relacionen ambas variables. La muestra está compuesta por 911 adolescentes con edades comprendidas entre 13 y 17 años ($M = 15.2$; $DT = 1.4$), de los que el 54% eran chicas, que cumplimentaron un cuestionario sociométrico y la *Escala de Mitos hacia el Amor*. Se realizó un análisis multivariado con dos factores: género y segregación por género, y los mitos del amor romántico como variables dependientes. Se encontraron efectos principales, sobre todo de la variable género, y efectos de interacción, que indican que son los chicos que mantienen relaciones segregadas los que obtienen las mayores puntuaciones en los mitos de la ambivalencia, que relacionan amor con agresión. Los mitos del amor romántico perviven en la adolescencia, y la segregación por género tiene efectos especialmente negativos en los chicos. Todo ello hace necesario seguir implementando acciones educativas en materia de igualdad, especialmente con adolescentes.

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The presence of gender-based violence in adolescence is especially worrying, as adolescence is a vital development stage in which beliefs and ways of establishing affective-sexual relationships are configured. A high prevalence of this problem among young people has been reported (Sardinha et al., 2022), with Spain among the countries with the highest rates (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). The study on the situation of violence against women in adolescence in Spain, published by the Government Delegation against Gender Violence (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2021), found that 37.2% of adolescents had suffered some type of violence at some point, and 14% said they had been pressured to perform some unwanted sexual act. One of the factors that maintains gender-based violence in adolescence is the acceptance of traditional gender roles and the associated stereotypes, which already appear in childhood, especially in boys (UNICEF, 2025). Furthermore, young people have been observed questioning equality policies, as evidenced by the Childhood and Youth Barometer of the Reina Sofía Centre of Fad Youth (Sanmartín et al., 2023). Along these lines, and equally concerning, are the results of a study by the CIS (2023) that analyzes perceptions of men's and women's equality and gender stereotypes, indicating that 51.8% of boys and 27.7% of girls in the age group between 16 and 24 years consider that the promotion of women's equality has gone too far and now, men are being discriminated.

Traditional gender roles and the associated stereotypes appear in couple relationships through the myths of romantic love (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020), defined as the set of biased and irrational beliefs about what it means to love, giving rise to specific relational models in heterosexual couples (Ferrer-Pérez, 2025; Gómez-Perea & Viejo, 2020). These myths are part of the ideology of romantic love. They are formulated as absolute and inflexible truths, indicating which roles men and women should have in relationships and encouraging unequal practices that help reproduce gender inequalities. In addition, whereas girls believe more in myths related to the idealization of love, such as eternal passion or that love is blind, boys believe more in myths that claim jealousy is proof of love and those linking love to violence (Bonilla-Algovia et al., 2021). Hence, the myths of romantic love constitute a risk factor for the appearance of gender violence (Martín et al., 2024; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020) because they underpin the construction of gender inequalities, also minimizing the severity of violent behaviors in the couple's sphere (Granda-Vivas & Moral-Jiménez, 2025; Piñeiro et al., 2022; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020).

Another relevant variable in this issue is gender segregation, defined as the tendency to relate to same-gender peers regarding both friends and casual encounters. From the perspective of homophilia, it is considered that this segregation is produced by affinity, and not so much by the rejection of people of the other gender (Bukowski et al., 2019). This phenomenon is observed at all stages of the life cycle, though with some differences: it is more frequent at school age, with a decrease observed as individuals reach adolescence and begin affec-

tive relationships (Maccoby, 1998; Mehta & Strough, 2009). The phenomenon of gender segregation is caused by multiple factors: social, institutional, behavioral, affective, and cognitive (Leaper, 2022; Mehta & Strough, 2009). Regarding the percentage of adolescents in segregated relationships, a recent study conducted in Spain reports that it exceeds 25% (Martín et al., 2025). Some studies indicate that avoiding segregation and promoting relationships with people of both sexes from an early age provides important benefits to the academic, social, and emotional spheres (Halim et al., 2021; Hanish et al., 2021; Hooijsma et al., 2020; Martín et al., 2022). In addition, establishing interpersonal relationships with peers of both genders is an effective way to combat prejudice and stereotypes (Boin et al., 2021). When relationships are segregated from an early age, girls tend to develop more internalizing problems and boys externalizing ones (Mehta & Strough, 2009), and they also develop different forms of emotional expression (Kwon et al., 2022). Thus, boys tend to express anger more often, whereas girls tend to express sadness more frequently (Lindsey, 2016). For boys, relationships with girls during adolescence help prevent the emergence of risky behaviors, such as substance use or aggression, by improving their sociability and fostering empathy (Ciarrochi et al., 2017; Martín, 2016). However, in the case of girls, some studies have found positive effects of segregation. Connolly (2004) points out that girls who interact with one another develop important skills for school adaptation, such as listening and respecting speaking turns. In addition, girls are more likely to ask for help and provide it to other girls for schoolwork (Kwon et al., 2022; Van Rijsewijk et al., 2016). In boys, segregation is associated with the development of relationship patterns characterized by immature and aggressive behaviors (Ciarrochi et al., 2017; Kwon et al., 2022; Martín et al., 2021; Mehta & Strough, 2009). In the field of gender-based violence, recent research has found that boys who have had mostly segregated relationships obtain the highest scores in sexism, both benevolent and hostile (Endendijk, 2024; Martín et al., 2025).

The present study

Considering all the above, it is clear that both the myths of romantic love and gender segregation are relevant variables when it comes to analyzing the sexist and anti-equality attitudes detected in a considerable number of adolescents. This work aims to investigate the direct relationship between gender segregation and the prevalence of romantic love myths, as no studies have been found that examine it. For this purpose, the prevalence of romantic love myths among adolescents who maintain segregated relationships will be compared with that of those who maintain mixed relationships, that is, with peers of both genders. According to prior literature, we expect to confirm gender differences in the prevalence of romantic love myths, as well as a clear relationship between gender segregation and the persistence of such myths. In addition, the association between gender segregation and romantic myths is expected to differ between girls and boys.

Method

Participants

A non-probabilistic sampling procedure was used, with a convenience sample comprising 923 students from Compulsory Secondary Education and High School across several public schools in Tenerife and Gran Canaria (Canary Islands). A total of 12 participants did not identify as a boy or a girl, as they marked either the non-binary gender option or another option, so they were excluded from the sample. The final sample comprised 911 participants aged 13-17 years ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.4$). Concerning gender, 54% were girls and 46% were boys. There were no age differences between the girls ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.4$) and the boys ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.5$), ($t_{(849,850)} = 0.479$, $p = .632$, $\delta = 0.0322$; 95% CI [-0.0998, 0.1642]).

Instruments

Sociometric questionnaire. To measure gender segregation in relationships among adolescents, an adaptation of sociometric questionnaires was used, in which no personal nominations were requested but instead gender nominations; a strategy that is useful for measuring gender segregation (Martín et al., 2021; 2025). The sociometric index used the number of emitted elections (Rodríguez & Morera, 2001). Thus, the single item asked the following question: “When you are going to do any group activity, who do you prefer to do it with?” The response options were: “with girls and boys alike”, “with same-gender peers”, “with peers of the other gender”, and “with no one”. In accordance with the objectives of this study, only those people who indicated the first two options were included in the final sample. Thus, of the 911 participants, the final sample comprised 770.

Scale of Myths about Love (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013). This instrument comprises 7 items that are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*, and which measure five myths: the soulmate (item 1: “Somewhere, there is someone predestined for each person”), eternal passion (item 2: “The intense passion of the early days of a relationship should last forever”), omnipotence (items 3 and 5: “Love is blind” and “True love can conquer all”, respectively), jealousy (item 4: “Jealousy is a proof of love”), and ambivalence (items 6 and 7: “You can love someone you mistreat” and “You can mistreat someone you love”, respectively). Subsequent studies found a two-factor structure via confirmatory factor analysis: the love-abuse link ($\alpha = .7$), which aligns with the ambivalence myth, and the idealization of love ($\alpha = .61$), which comprises the remaining myths (Bonilla-Algovia et al., 2021). However, in this study, we analyzed the seven myths separately to assess the influence of gender segregation on each one.

Procedure

This research was approved by the Research Ethics and Animal Welfare Committee of the University of La Laguna (code:

CEIBA 2021-3108). The managers of several public secondary schools in Tenerife and Gran Canaria were contacted to explain the objectives of the study and request their collaboration. Finally, seven agreed to participate, requesting that the questionnaires be completed during the tutoring hours. One manager asked that the questionnaires be administered on paper because the school had a zero-mobile policy. The rest of the managers preferred that it be completed online, so the battery of tests was also prepared as a Google Forms questionnaire. Verbal informed consent was requested from the students, informing them that their participation would be voluntary and assuring them of the anonymity of their responses. Previously, the management teams of the centers had informed the families to request their consent.

Data analysis

After completing data collection and filtering, the information was uploaded to a file for analysis using SPSS 21. Firstly, a contingency table was calculated to assess differences in gender segregation between boys and girls. The chi-square (χ^2) test was used as a contrast statistic. Secondly, the influence of gender and gender segregation on the seven myths, considered dependent variables, was examined using multivariate analysis (MANOVA), while controlling for age (ANCOVA). Multivariate normality was assessed using PP plots, and the Levene test was used to confirm variance homogeneity, with p -values $< .05$ for most dependent variables. The homogeneity of the slopes for the covariate age was also calculated, and p -values $< .05$ were found in most of the myths. Box’s M -test indicated heterogeneity between the variance-covariance matrices of the groups (Box’s $M = 425.63$, $F_{(198)} = 2.084$, $p < .001$), so we decided to use Pillai’s Trace due to its robustness to the violation of assumptions and its power to detect differences between means when they exist. Pillai’s trace (unbalanced Type II method) revealed a significant interaction effect between gender and gender segregation. To test the hypotheses regarding interactions among the variables, an independent analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each myth, with age as a covariate (ANCOVA). The effect size was estimated using partial eta squared (η^2). Values below .01 indicate a very small effect, values between .01 and .05 are considered small, between .06 and .13 are moderate, and values equal to or greater than .14 indicate a large effect (López-Martín & Ardura, 2023).

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentages of girls and boys who maintain mixed and segregated relationships. Although the number of young people in mixed relationships was twice that of those in segregated relationships, the latter group comprised a considerable number of adolescents. No differences were found in the distribution according to gender ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 5.239$, $p > .05$).

To analyze the effects of gender and gender segregation on romantic love myths, a multivariate analysis of variance

Figure 1

Type of relationships established according to gender

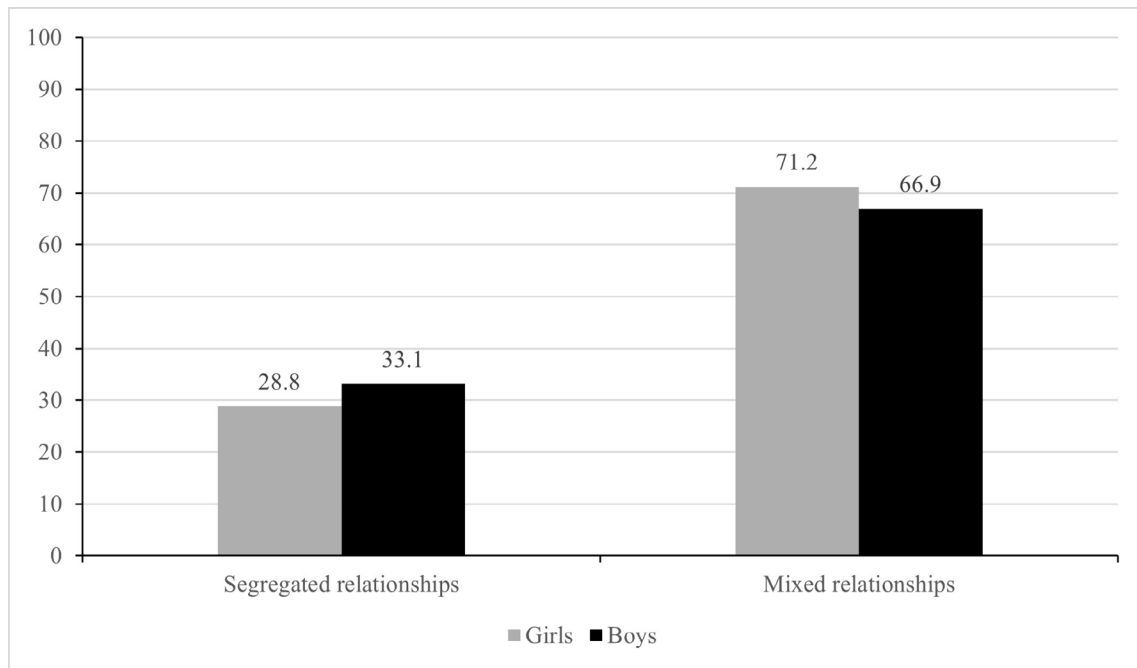


Table 1

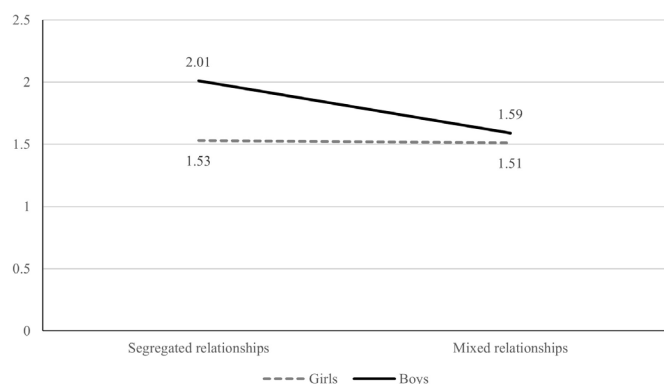
Means and standard deviations by gender and type of relationships, and ANOVA

	Segregated relationships		Mixed relationships		Effect	F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD			
Soulmate					G	1.99	.003
Girls	3.02	0.97	3.22	1.07	S	1.538	.002
Boys	2.97	1.27	2.98	1.13	G*S	1.275	.002
Eternal passion					G	11.558*	.015
Girls	3.31	1.01	3.43	1.13	S	4.904*	.006
Boys	2.98	1.07	3.16	1.12	G*S	.105	.000
Love is blind					G	9.322**	.012
Girls	3.26	1.21	3.23	1.21	S	1.751	.002
Boys	2.82	1.2	3.07	1.29	G*S	2.881	.004
Jealousy is proof of love					G	16.427***	.021
Girls	1.87	0.97	2.08	1.08	S	1.135	.003
Boys	2.35	1.27	2.28	1.2	G*S	2.392	.003
True love can conquer all					G	6.591**	.009
Girls	2.74	1.12	2.88	1.22	S	2.784	.004
Boys	2.96	1.26	3.14	1.26	G*S	.207	.000
You can love someone you mistreat					G	12.302***	.016
Girls	1.53	0.96	1.51	0.97	S	6.817*	.009
Boys	2.01	1.21	1.59	1	G*S	5.815*	.008
You can mistreat someone you love					G	20.765***	.007
Girls	1.24	0.57	1.26	0.69	S	4.883*	.006
Boys	1.69	1.14	1.39	0.84	G*S	5.6*	.007

Note. G = gender, S = segregation, G*S = Gender x Segregation interaction.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2

Effects of the gender \times segregation interaction on the ambivalence myth: “You can love someone you mistreat”



(MANOVA) was performed, including age as a covariate (ANCOVA). The ANCOVA revealed a significant effect of age (Pillai's trace = .022, $F_{(7,000)} = 2.428$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .022$). MANOVA yielded significant effects of gender (Pillai's trace = .091, $F_{(7,000)} = 10.587$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .091$) and gender segregation (Pillai's trace = .022, $F_{(7,000)} = 2.359$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .022$), as well as in the interaction between the two (Pillai's trace = .021, $F_{(7,000)} = 2.229$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .021$). After verifying joint significance via MANOVA, the standard analytical protocol was followed, performing ANOVAs for each of the seven dependent variables (i.e., the myths), including age as a covariate (see Table 1).

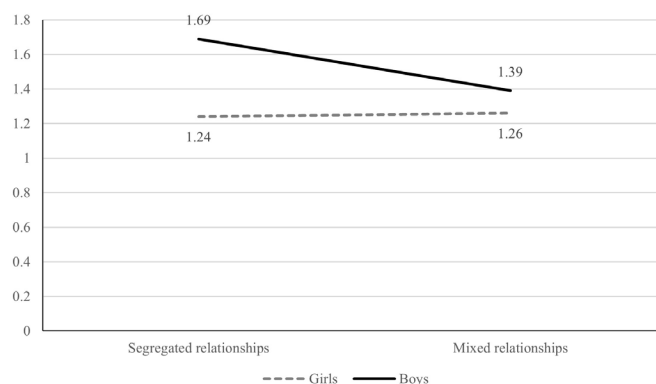
No significant differences were found in the scores on the soulmate myth, either for gender, gender segregation, or for the interaction between the two variables. Main effects were found in the eternal passion myth for both variables (gender and gender segregation), with higher scores among girls and in the group that maintained mixed relationships. The Gender \times Gender Segregation interaction was not significant.

In the case of the love-is-blind omnipotence myth, only a main effect of gender was found, with girls obtaining significantly higher scores. No differences were found between adolescents who maintained segregated and mixed relationships, or in the interaction effects between these two variables. In the case of the true-love-can-conquer-all omnipotence myth, a main effect of gender was observed, with boys scoring higher than girls. In the omnipotence-of-love myths, no significant effects were found for gender segregation or its interaction with gender. A main effect of gender was observed in the myth of jealousy being a test of love, with boys scoring significantly higher than girls.

In the case of the ambivalence myths, main effects of the two variables and their interaction were found. In both myths, scores were higher among boys, among people who maintained segregated relationships, and especially among boys who related only to other boys (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 3

Effects of the gender \times segregation interaction on the ambivalence myth: “You can mistreat someone you love”



Discussion

This work analyzed the relationship between gender and gender segregation and the prevalence of myths of romantic love among adolescents. Although these two variables are relevant when analyzing gender-based violence at this stage of development, no studies have been carried out to analyze their relationship. The first result to highlight is that, from a quantitative viewpoint, gender segregation is a phenomenon that affects girls and boys equally. Although the establishment of mixed relationships is more common, which tends to increase with adolescence, and therefore when initiating couple relationships, the percentage of young people who maintain segregated relationships is still considerable, as other studies have also indicated (Leaper, 2022; Martín et al., 2025; Mehta & Strough, 2009).

When analyzing the relationship between gender and gender segregation and the myths of romantic love separately, some relevant results are found. With respect to gender, the results of this study align with those of other studies (Bonilla-Algobia et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013), reporting that girls obtain higher scores than boys on myths related to the idealization of love (e.g., eternal passion or love is blind). In contrast, boys score higher on myths that consider jealousy proof of love and on ambivalence myths, which consider love and aggression compatible. The only difference from Bonilla-Algobia et al.'s (2021) study is that, in this work, boys score higher on the myth that love can conquer all, which did not occur in Bonilla's work. Thus, the predominant myths in boys are related to controlling and violent behaviors towards the partner, which is consistent with the thinking that love prevails even when violent behaviors occur. On the other hand, the myths that predominate among girls concern the downplaying of the severity of violent behavior within the couple (Granda-Vivas & Moral-Jiménez, 2025; Piñeiro et al., 2022; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020). From these results, it can be deduced that an intervention conducted in adolescence to pro-

mote equality must have some common components, as well as specific ones for each gender that enable effective work, taking into account boys' and girls' peculiarities in the myths of romantic love.

In the case of gender segregation, some differences were also found between individuals who maintain segregated relationships and those who have mixed relationships. Thus, people who maintain mixed relationships score higher in the myth of eternal passion. A possible explanation is that, although segregated relationships continue to be maintained during adolescence, relationships with people of the opposite gender begin to be established, as the first couple relationships are experienced, when love tends to be idealized (Leaper, 2022; Mehta & Strough, 2009). Therefore, the simple fact of establishing mixed relationships, as is the case with the first affective relationships, does not necessarily mean that the belief in the myths of romantic love diminishes. Differences were also found in ambivalence myths, where adolescents who maintain segregated relationships scored higher than those who have relationships with peers of both genders. Relating mostly to people of the same gender can lead to socialization in gender stereotypes, which results in the establishment of asymmetrical and unequal relationships (Leaper, 2022). Thus, romantic relationships in adolescence can be distorted by interaction styles learned in the same-gender peer group, where gender stereotypes and roles may have been strengthened, and positive attitudes towards gender violence may even appear (Martín et al., 2025; Mehta & Strough, 2009; Underwood & Rosen, 2009).

Regarding the effects of the interaction between gender and gender segregation on the myths of romantic love, the results show that boys who maintain segregated relationships (i.e., with other boys) obtain the highest scores in the myths of ambivalence, which relate love to violence. While some authors have pointed out that gender segregation can have positive effects on girls (Connolly, 2004; Kwon et al., 2022; Van Rijsewijk et al., 2016), there is a consensus that the effects of segregation on boys are negative, as it has been associated with the development of relationship patterns based on immature and aggressive behaviors (Ciarrochi et al., 2017; Kwon et al., 2022; Martín et al., 2021; Mehta & Strough, 2009), and also with higher levels of sexism, both benevolent and hostile (Endendijk, 2024; Martín et al., 2025).

Limitations and practical implications

One limitation of this work is that, due to the cross-sectional design, causal relationships cannot be established. And although the results achieved show a clear relationship between gender segregation and the acceptance of the myths of romantic love, they do not clarify whether this relationship is bidirectional, as boys who agree more strongly with the myths of ambivalence may tend to establish segregated relationships. In this sense, including designs that establish causal relationships between the two variables would be a relevant contribution to future research on this topic. Another limitation is that segregation was measured using a single item that referred to

preferences. Although in adolescence, peer relationships are usually established largely by these preferences, some segregated relationships may be forced, such as those in some sports. Future research should analyze the voluntary nature of establishing peer relationships, as well as the contexts and activities in which such relationships are established, as these variables have been shown to have an important effect on sociometric indices (Martín & Muñoz de Bustillo, 2009).

Despite these limitations, this work provides relevant findings that strengthen the struggle against a problem that has been on the social agenda for a long time and whose eradication still seems distant, even though great progress has been made. Among the practical implications that emerge from this work, it is necessary to strengthen equality training to combat the pernicious effects that these irrational beliefs, the myths of romantic love, have on the establishment of affective relationships in adolescence. However, it is also advisable, especially in the case of boys, to avoid segregation and to encourage the establishment of mixed relationships in the interventions carried out for the prevention of gender violence, avoiding, as far as possible, the segregation of male adolescent relationships in all areas: academic, sports, community, recreational, etc.

Conclusions

The first conclusion that emerges from this work is that the myths of romantic love persist among adolescents, also confirming that, in general, girls believe more in myths related to the idealization of love. In contrast, boys have internalized myths related to control and the justification of violence. The entrenchment of these myths in the adolescent population seems to be one of the explanatory factors for the prevalence of gender-based violence in intimate partner relationships, as well as its denial or minimization, which seems to be increasing in recent times. The second conclusion drawn from the results of this study is that the segregation of gender relationships is also related to belief in myths. In the case of boys, segregation is clearly related to the belief in the myths of ambivalence, becoming a risk factor for the appearance of gender violence when they establish couple relationships. In contrast, boys and girls who establish mixed relationships believe more strongly in the myth of eternal passion than those who maintain segregated relationships, possibly due to the establishment of affective relationships. This indicates that the mere establishment of mixed relationships does not, in itself, promote positive attitudes towards equality. Thus, the design and implementation of actions aimed at promoting gender equality in adolescence must take into account the specificities of girls' and boys' perspectives on the myths of romantic love.

Authors contribution

Conceptualization: E.M., A.T., J.A.A.S.
 Methodology: E.M.
 Data curation: E.M.
 Investigation: E.M., A.T., J.A.A.S.
 Formal analysis: E. M.

Writing – Original draft: E. M.

Writing – Review & editing: E.M., A.T., J.A.A.S.

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare that there is not conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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