

**Myths of romantic love:
gender perspectives in adolescents dating**

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Abstract

Love and sex appeal are social issues, not biological, instinctive and uncontrollable. This means that there is the possibility of transforming the attraction towards the people who abuse us, into a satisfactory and passionate relationship, both short or long term. In order to expand the knowledge on this topic, the aim of this study is to analyze adolescents dating through a gender perspective. The key research question is: how sentimental and sexual choices of adolescents are influenced by the myths of romantic love? A sample of high school students in Majorca (Spain) answered a questionnaire specially

prepared for this purpose. Data indicate that myths of romantic love show significant gender difference: this means that girls accept romantic myths more than boys do. Although social desirability presents some limits, these results suggest the importance of adding specific subjects to the students study program and the need of training teachers about them as well.

Keywords: dating, gender differences, gender violence, adolescents, romantic love.

1. Introduction

The research I carried on during my PhD in Women and Gender Studies, allowed me to examine the sexual and sentimental relationships among adolescents in Majorca island. As part of a larger study, the aim of this work is to analyze the significance of romantic myths among adolescents, and how the concept of romantic love persist in sexual and sentimental life of adolescents. According to social-demographic variables, this analysis has been realized in a gender perspective, evaluating if and which extent the behavior adopted in affective and sexual relationships obey different causes in women and men.

As starting point of this study, we'd like to underline the fundamental distinction between sex and gender. We assume that gender is a complex issue based on biological sex, but not necessarily coinciding with it, because besides biological sex, socio-cultural and environmental factors participate (García-Vega *et al.* 2010). On that subject, Subirats (2001, 23) holds that «human beings are not women or men only because of their sex, since this is the biological base; above this base there is the generic identity, which has a social nature». So, societies have created for female and male different roles and patterns of behavior according to their sex, giving cause for limits both for female and male, in all aspects of their lives.

Araya (2004) in total accordance with Subirats, underlines that sexist distinction concerns women and men, although in a different way because in the context of a patriarchal society and in a hierarchy scale, women are considered inferior to men. Thus,

women and men socialize in a different way and they learn how to love in different ways too. These normative models, learnt during the process of socialization and defined by authors like Marcela Lagarde (1999; 2005) «mandates of gender», establish what it means to be a masculine man and a feminine woman. So, according to Lagarde (2000), males define themselves as «being-for-themselves» and in the mandates of masculinity there are ideas of being rational, self-sufficient, controlling, provider, with power and success, brave and decisive, secure and self-confident. Women, on the other hand, define themselves as «being-for-others» and in the mandates of femininity there are the role of care provider, the role of responsible for the wellness of others, the capacity of dedication, and finally, the concept to be always available for others. Overall, women learn how to develop tasks of care, how to sacrifice their needs and desires, and, specially, they assume a predisposition to love, up to the point of considering themselves a complete person only when they belong to someone.

So, with regards to love and partner relationships in an equal society, we underline the importance of transmitting that sexual-affective relationships are not instinctive and irremediable or a result of an uncontrollable force or mysterious magic (Puigvert *et al.* 2005). Love and physical attraction are sentiments built socially, the result of education and transmission of values that give people resources to identify and remove situations where desire and reason are shown as opposites (*Ibidem*). Moreover, considering that couple relationships can take us from adolescence to old age, and that the presence of false beliefs are becoming elements of the continuation, or the end of a relationship (Rubio-Garay *et al.* 2015), this research wants to analyze if among students persists the concept of romantic love, settled on the patriarchal culture.

2. Romantic love: basis of inequality

Love is a cultural issue, defined in different way accordingly to the time (Barrón *et al.* 1999; Yela 2000; 2003). In words of Sveva Magaraggia (2017, 38), «it doesn't exist a sentiment called love which has crossed ages and places, remaining unchanged: today, what we mean with love, depends both on our cultural structure, the patriarchy, and on our economic system, the neoliberalism». According to Luhmann (1982), we love and

suffer according to cultural imperatives, thus love can be treated not only as a feeling, but rather as a symbolic code which shows how to communicate effectively in situations where it would otherwise appear improbable, and encourages one to have the appropriate feelings.

Although we don't have a unique definition of romantic love, we can try to understand what it is, referring to, for example, some of the most recent classifications about the subject (Bosch *et al.* 2012). According to Yela (2003), romantic myths have been defined as the group of beliefs, socially accepted, about the «supposed real nature of love» (2003, 264), and, same that happens in other fields, these beliefs are usually fictitious, absurd, dishonest, non-rational and impossible to accomplish. It's important to remember that the concept of romantic love (and its derivative myths) not only is related to the gender socialization, but it is also supported by it. The social frame of this kind of love is settled on the patriarchal conception of the inequalities of gender, the discrimination of women and their submission to heterosexuality, as the sole option of sexual-affective relationship (Ruiz Repullo 2009).

Since the beginning of XIX century, a strong link between romantic love, marriage and sexuality appeared, and during these last decades it has become so strong that romantic love evolved into the fundamental reason to get married and to have a relationship (Simpson *et al.* 1986; Ubillos *et al.* 2001). Thus romantic love, marriage and sexual satisfaction became the norm, and sexual satisfaction needed to be achieved inside the marriage, as the only way to guarantee procreation (Barrón *et al.* 1999; Yela 2003).

Love and romanticism, both words which raise nice and positive feelings and, as said before, indicate a model of love typical of our culture, actually define a concept of relationship between men and women, which not always is so nice and positive. Romantic love means an ideal love, a love which pretends a total dedication to a person we have molded by ourselves, a sort of tailor made ideal partner who it's not real and crashes into the necessity to preserve our personality and our emotional independence (Caro 2008). Thus, in name of love, a sort of fusion of two human beings is required, but beside the assumption of harmony and reciprocity, we should ask if this fusion maybe is causing also sacrifice and dismay, either for women and men (Melandri 2011).

Researchers have shown how girls tend to believe that romantic love has to do with the romance of search and dedication, it is the fusion with the other person to the point that it becomes not only a way to organize the future, but also the way to build their personal identity, causing anxiety and the need to compromise, at the same time. Men, on the other hand, believe that romantic love has to do with seduction, it's a way to access girls, but it doesn't involve nuclear aspects of their personal identity (Leal 2007). In other words, for women love means wait, passivity, care, renunciation, dedication and sacrifice; while for men love means to be an hero, a conqueror who seduces, breaks the rules, protects, saves, dominates and receives (Ferrer and Bosch 2013).

Love understood in this way is a fantastic love, the kind of love we find in movies and songs, where tragedy and idealization of the beloved are the permanent topics; romantic love is always successful, it gains against any kind of difficulties and, because of it, affection and conflict are the two sides of the same medal.

Our cultural environment (movie, television, music, literature etc.) underline that big obstacles and sacrifices strengthen love passion, thus jealousy, control and tragedy are the basic ingredients of romances. A clear example of it are the heroines of classic literature, as Madame Bovary or Ana Karenina, women who lived their romance with total dedication and as the fundamental project of their lives, while masculine protagonists lived the same romance just as an experience, an aspect of their life (Ortiz 1997).

Although great changes achieved during XX century thanks to feminism, researchers confirm that love stays the same priority and represents a vital project for many women (Sanpedro 2005), who adopt the model of romantic love and consider the achievement of it the main goal of their lives, ready to sacrifice in name of it, even their personal expectations (Flecha *et al.* 2004).

We must add that this model is frustrating not only for women who, as said before, are obligated to sacrifice their independence, but also for men who must assume the role of director/dominator and must have deal of initiative in all aspects of the relationship. Men, educated to be strong and not to show their emotions, are not able to deal with sentiments as sensibility, empathy and understanding, and must be wild and bad to achieve the attention of girls (Leal 2007).

Because of these beliefs, we consider the analysis of the concept of love is crucial to figure out the mechanisms causing the subordination of women to men and, overall, the functioning of gender system and its potential transformation (Esteban *et al.* 2005). In the same vein, Mari Luz Esteban defines love as a «cultural creation and platform for the inequality» (2009, 39), and for the same, she affirms the necessity of analyze it in all its aspects and complexity: «a general process in which the formulation of the subjects and the definition of inequalities between men and women are strictly jointed» (Ivi, 37). This link between possession and submission in the model of romantic love has been underlined by Giddens (2000) too, according to whom ideal love has been always known in terms of gender difference and has to do with the idea of possession of the other, but finally, since the whole situation is nuanced with romanticism, suffering is softened.

In alternative to this concept of love, Puigvert *et al.* (2005), maintain that love relationships not necessarily are divided in two groups: violent but passionate, and respectful but boring. On the contrary, love, passion and respect could perfectly live together and create relationships absolutely satisfactory and equal. In this way, analyzing couple relationships among adolescents is crucial because these incipient dating determinate initial ideas about what to expect from a relationship and how to behave in intimacy, all points which affect the adulthood. Under these premises, it's necessary to make up a new model of love, more equal, based on respect and out of masculine and feminine stereotypes.

The analysis of the meaning of love has a special interest also for its potential link with the gender-based violence and particularly with the Intimate Partner Violence (Ipv), the most widespread and popular kind of gender violence, only recently become object of special consideration from politics, because of its most serious and dangerous expression, the femicide, which represents the only field where female victims of lethal violence exceed definitely the male ones (Giomi 2017). Romantic love and its myths are considered factors which can boost the gender based violence (Garrido 2001; González and Santana 2001; Sanmartín *et al.* 2003; Ramos 2015), evaluated a major problem of public health by the World Health Organization (1998) and a social issue which present-

ly has a huge relevance considering the devastating consequences for life and health of women (Calvete *et al.* 2007).

Finally, as Yela (2000) says, since most of the problems and sufferings caused by love and couple relationships come from a deficient information, false ideas, stereotypes, romantic myths, immaturity and the eternal confusion between love and desire, what we propose with this work is to provide data that can help to understand a little bit more this slippery and inscrutable phenomenon whose psychological and social relevance are enormous, as we can see daily.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The sample of this study comprises 320 High Schools students (48% male and 52% female) in the island of Majorca. Most of them have European nationality (83.1%), and Spain is the most represented country (96.1%); Latin America is the second one most represented geographic area (14.2%), where Ecuador is the country mostly represented (20%). Africa and Asia are represented with 1.9% and 0.6% respectively.

3.2. Instruments

A questionnaire created for this purpose was used to collect socio-demographic data: sex (man/women), residence, place of birth and sex of the current partner. Singles were requested to specify the sex of the partner of last relationship. In order to analyze in which measure the concept of romantic love and its myths persist in couple partnerships and to boost power relationships, the Scale of myths of romantic love by Ferrer, Bosch and Navarro (2010) was used.

As we can see in Table 1, this scale consists of 10 items which define the following myths of romantic love: better half, eternal passion, omnipotence, marriage, couple and jealousy. The survey respondents could agree or disagree with the items using a scale from 1 (total disagree) to 5 (total agree), in this way, the highest score meant a higher acceptance of the myth.

<i>Myth</i>	<i>Item</i>
➤ Myth of better half	1. Somewhere there is someone predestined for you
➤ Myth of eternal passion	2. Intense passion at the beginning of a couple relationship should be forever
➤ Myth of omnipotence	3. Love is blind 10. Real love can everything
➤ Myth of marriage	4. Marriage is the grave of love (inverse)
➤ Myth of couple	5. Be happy is possible also without a partner (inverse) 7. Get divorced is a failure
➤ Myth of jealousy	6. Jealousy is a proof of love
➤ Myth of ambivalence	8. It's possible to love someone we abuse 9. It's possible to abuse someone we love

Table 1. Myths of romantic love

3.3. Procedure

In Majorca island there are 63 high schools: 42 of them are public, 14 are state-subsidized and 5 private, some of the private and state-subsidized schools are run by religious staff. We contacted all high schools first by e-mail and then by phone, to explain the object of our study and our need to do field work with students. All private and state-subsidized schools answered they were not interested in touch that kind of subjects with their students, because «sexuality is a delicate matter better to be kindly treated in family», not at school. Luckily, public schools had another reaction and demonstrated more interest in our work, so after informing and obtaining their permission, we delivered the paper questionnaires to the students in each participating class. The questionnaire was self-answered and it was delivered before starting classes or during tutorials. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and answers would be anonymous. Students were informed also that the objective of the survey was twofold: to analyze the concept of love and to have the opportunity of thinking about it. The average

time required to complete the questionnaires was 30 minutes. Data have been analyzed with statistical package SPSS (version 14.0 for Windows).

3.4. Data analysis

To test the independence between two variables we used the Pearson chi-squared test with a statistical confidence level of 95%. Pearson's correlation ($p < 0.5$) between sexual attitudes and behaviors was considered significant in this study. To analyze data with a gender perspective, we used T test for independent samples.

4. Results

The results of averages and deviations in female and male for each item are shown in Table 2.

The average of agreement for each item of the scale of the myths of romantic love is shown in Fig. 1.

As observed in Fig. 1, item 2, which represents the myth of eternal passion, *Intense passion at the beginning of a couple relationship should be forever*, is the item with the highest agreement with an average value of 4.14; on the contrary, item 9 which represents the myth of the ambivalence, *It's possible to abuse someone we love*, is the one most people disagree on, with an average value of 1.54.

As observed, item 1, which represents the myth of better half, *Somewhere there is someone predestined for you*, revealed statistically significant differences between boys and girls: girls agreed more than boys with a value of 3.58 and 3.14 respectively. Item 2 which represents myth of eternal passion, *Intense passion at the beginning of a couple relationship should be forever*, is not statistically significant and, as said before, it's the myth with the highest agreement both in boys and girls, with a value of 4.07 and 4.21 respectively.

Next, item 3, *Love is blind* (which represents the myth of omnipotence together with item 10, *Real love is omnipotent*), yielded significant differences: girls agreed more than boys with the statement *Love is blind* with the value of 3.76, while boys average was 3.30. Also in item 10, *Real love can everything*, significant differences between boys and girls were found: girls agreed with this myth with an average of 3.86, while boys

agreed less with an average of 3.56. These results show that women believe in the myth of omnipotence (love can everything) more than men.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
<i>item_1:</i> Somewhere there is someone predestined for you	319	3,37	1,150
<i>item_2:</i> Intense passion at the beginning of a couple relationship should be forever	318	4,14	1,007
<i>item_3:</i> Love is blind	320	3,54	1,249
<i>item_4:</i> Marriage is the grave of love	319	2,31	1,166
<i>item_5:</i> Be happy is possible also without a partner	319	4,06	1,042
<i>item_6:</i> Jealousy is a proof of love	318	3,00	1,260
<i>item_7:</i> Get divorced is a failure	321	2,22	1,263
<i>item_8:</i> It's possible to love someone we abuse	319	1,63	1,062
<i>item_9:</i> It's possible to abuse someone we love	314	1,54	1,042
<i>item_10:</i> Real love can everything	320	3,72	1,187

Table 2. Table of averages and deviations for each item

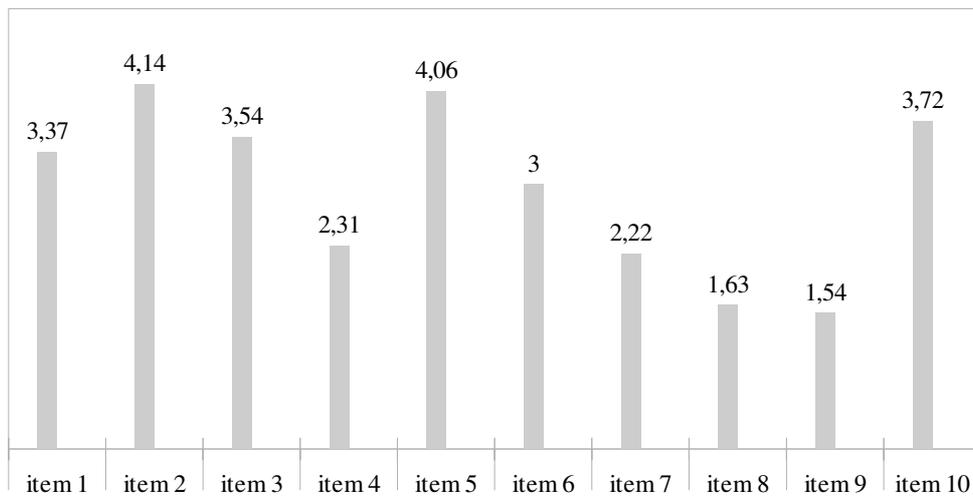


Fig. 1. Average of agreement for each item

Next, in Fig. 2, we present averages and deviations disclosed for sex.

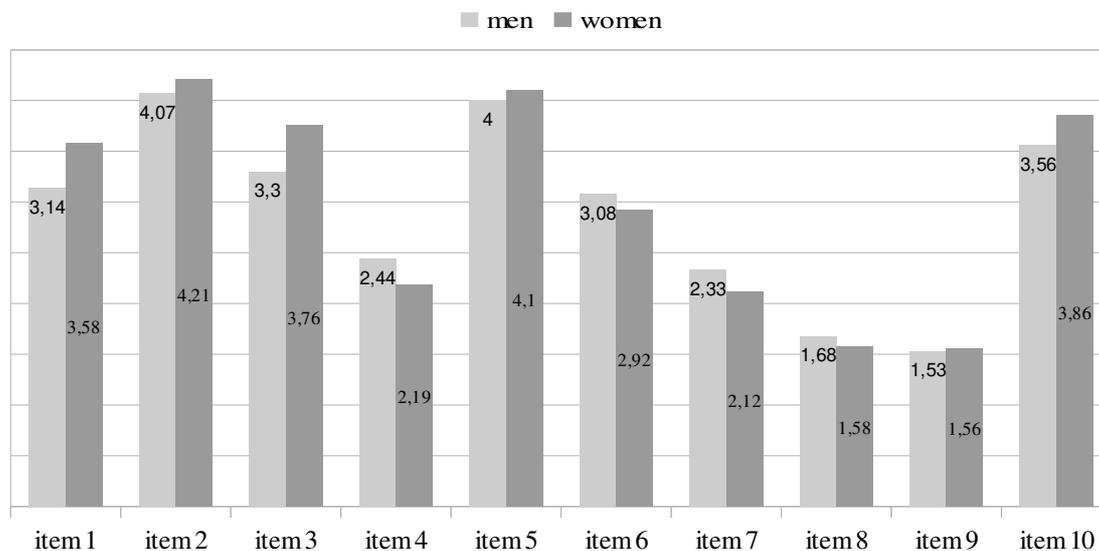


Fig. 2. Averages and deviations disclosed for sex

To analyze data with a gender perspective, the T test for independent samples was used. Results are shown in the next table (Table 3).

	<i>t</i>	<i>gl</i>	<i>Sig. (bilateral)</i>
<i>item_1</i>	-3,502	316	,001
<i>item_2</i>	-1,250	315	,212
<i>item_3</i>	-3,326	317	,001
<i>item_4</i>	1,911	297,712	,057
<i>item_5</i>	-,881	316	,379
<i>item_6</i>	1,160	315	,247
<i>item_7</i>	1,493	318	,136
<i>item_8</i>	,781	316	,435
<i>item_9</i>	-,218	311	,828
<i>item_10</i>	-2,313	317	,021

In all cases equal variances have been assumed except myth number 4 (the marriage is the grave of love).

Table 3. T test for independent samples

The omnipotence of love means that real love can overcome any kind of obstacles, love is enough to solve any kind of problem and, finally, love is necessary to justify any kind of behavior. This myth can be used also as a pretext to not modify bad attitudes and/or to deny all conflicts in the couple, making the confrontation difficult (Ferrer *et al.* 2010).

With regard to item 4 which represents the myth of marriage, *Marriage is the grave of love*, gender differences are not observed, however, as descriptive statistics, girls disagree with this sentence more than boys with an average value of 2.19 and 2.44 respectively. It's important to say that this myth establishes a link between two different elements: one, marriage, with its presumption to be durable, and the other one, passion, which is a temporary emotional condition. Because of this basic difference it can be difficult to put together marriage and passion and, consequently, suffering a disappointment could be very probable. We report that this myth is measured in an inverse way: a high agreement to this point, corresponds to a low acceptance of the myth. Therefore, when a person affirms that marriage is the grave of love, it is affirming that marriage is not a guarantee of love; the other way around, less agreement with this point (I don't agree marriage is the grave of love), means more agreement with the myth (marriage is a guarantee of love). Thus, back to our results, both girls and boys expressed their disagreement with this point, reinforcing the concept explained before, that love and marriage have a very tight link.

Next, item 5, *Be happy is possible also without a partner* (which together with item 7, *Get divorced is a failure*, represents the myth of a couple), doesn't show gender differences and for this, both boys and girls agree that it is possible to be happy without a partner, with an average value of 4.00 and 4.10 respectively. As observed in the myth of marriage, also the myth of a couple is measured in an inverse way, that is: affirming it's possible to be happy also without a couple relationship, means taking off importance to the belief that a couple is something natural and universal, and monogamy in love has existed from time immemorial and in all cultures. Accepting this belief can provoke internal conflicts in those persons who divert somehow from this rule (singles, persons who have a partner of the same sex, persons who have more than one partner etc.). Back to our results, survey respondents who agreed with the concept that it's possible to be

happy even without a partner, are saying that a couple relationship is not the unique way to be happy and it's not a guarantee to happiness.

Item 6, *Jealousy is a proof of love*, which represents the myth of jealousy, doesn't show statistical significance: girls don't agree with it with a value of 2.92 and neither do boys with a value of 3.08. Item 7, *Get divorced is a failure*, also doesn't show statistical significance between boys and girls. However, if we look at the averages only in a descriptive manner, we can see that boys overtake girls with a value of 2.33 (boys) versus a value of 2.12 (girls). Item 8, *It's possible to love someone we abuse*, which represents the myth of ambivalence, doesn't show statistical differences because both boys (1.68) and girls (1.58) hardly disagree. Item 9, *It's possible to abuse someone we love*, which represents the myth of ambivalence together with item 8, doesn't show statistical differences, and boys strongly disagree with this affirmation with a value of 1.53, almost the same as women with a value of 1.56.

5. Discussion

The main conclusion we can deduct from this study is that education should invest resources to mainstream the concept of gender equality in order to guarantee the same opportunities both for boys and girls in all fields of life. A stronger intervention is requested in those aspects of sentimental life where statistical gender differences were observed, that is: item 1, *Somewhere there is someone predestined for you*; item 3, *Love is blind* and item 10, *Real love can everything*. We remember that item 1 describes the myth of better half and item 3 and 10 describe both the myth of omnipotence.

Similar results are found in the study of Ferrer, Bosch and Navarro (2010), who analyzed level acceptance of the myths of romantic love among Spanish population, using the same questionnaire used for our research. Results show the existence of gender differences in the myth of better half, in the myth of omnipotence and in the myth of couple although in all these cases, the coefficient of contingency points out the existence of a small association in these variables. Boys show a significant disagreement with the myth of better half and with the belief that love is blind (myth of omnipotence), and a significant agreement with the myth of couple. Girls show significantly more indiffer-

ence with the myth of better half, more agreement with the belief that love is blind (myth of omnipotence) and more disagreement with the myth of couple.

We underline that these results are very similar to those of our study, where the myth which recorded the highest agreement was the myth of eternal passion, *Intense passion at the beginning of a couple relationship should be forever* (average of 4.14) and the myth which recorded the highest disagreement was the myth of couple (item 5), *To be happy is possible also without a partner* (average of 4.06). Thus, those persons who showed their agreement with the concept that it is possible to be happy also without a partner, are saying that they don't accept the romantic belief that couple relationships guarantee the happiness of people.

Similar results are found also in the study of Marroquí and Cervera (2014), who used the same scale of myths of romantic love to evaluate the internalization of false myths of romantic love and the danger that this internalization could represent in case of detrimental relationships. The sample comprised 153 persons (39 men and 117 women) with age 18-35. Data showed, as in our case study, that some false myths with a clearly sexist trend or with a violence connotation as «it's possible to love someone we abuse», «it's possible to abuse someone we love» or «jealousy is a proof of love», recorded a rejection almost absolute, around 90%. Myths which show a more subtle prejudice as «love can everything» or «there is only a better half» and «love is blind», are much more internalized in young people: around 73% believe that love can everything, 65% believe that there is only a better half and 70.6% believe that love is blind. Therefore, these beliefs are dangerous because accepting detrimental behaviors can end in violent gender relationships.

Along the same lines there is the study of Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras and Carrera (2015), realized with a sample of 800 high school students of the province of Galicia. In this study the scale of myths of romantic love was used to analyze the link between the concept of love and sexist attitudes. Results point out clear differences between boys and girls as regard to love: boys accept more than girls myths related to love-mistreatment. On the other hand, although there is no significant differences between boys and girls about false concepts of idealized love, we can observe a slight higher acceptance of this myth in girls.

In the light of results and analyzed studies, it's clear that myths of romantic love persist in the way adolescents live their romances. Girls especially still have an idea of love typical of fairytales, where there is only a person predestinated to each one and where love with its power is the solution for any kind of problem. This fact confirm the thesis explained previously: although women during last century achieved many rights thanks to feminism, mainstream female socialization patterns construct love a vital project. As said before, this kind of love is the basis of inequality and represent a trap for women who, although unhappy with their relationship, cannot interrupt it because they believe they are predestinated for that person. It doesn't matter if the partner is disrespectful or violent, they will remain with him because at the end the objective is not to be happy, but it's to save the relationship regardless of the cost. Thus, it's necessary to insist in a sexual-emotional education to benefit changes of mentality and to achieve couple relationships free of prejudice. Moreover, it's important to delve into the study of violent behavior in adolescents dating, and to identify attitudes of tolerance (Rodríguez-Franco *et al.* 2012).

This study suggests that a new formulation of the meaning of love is requested to prevent the based gender violence (Bosch *et al.* 2006): a new formulation where subjects involved have equal conditions and everybody accept the same values of respect, confidence, emotional compromise and reciprocity. As stated at the beginning, the starting point of this study is that both love and sexual appealing are social constructions, not biological, instinctive and uncontrollable. This fact implies the possibility to change the attraction toward people who abuse us, in order to develop relationships completely satisfactory and equal. How? With education, at school, since the very beginning in nursery school and after in all levels of education: classes of sentimental and sexual education to prevent and oppose gender violence, to promote equal relationships based on reciprocal respect and to eradicate gender stereotypes.

Education, as a socialization agent, represents a fundamental driving force of change, because it provides an adequate space to reflect on analyzed problems, their causes and their consequences. Thus, the introduction of emotional and sexual education in schools, as well education in equality, is crucial for the improvement of self-esteem, for

the capacity to analyze feelings and conflicts and finally, to find resources to solve them.

More in detail and considering the results of our study, we ask for an education to teach women to live love stories with more self awareness and empowerment so, in case of unsatisfactory relationships, instead of believing that «there is only a better half», empowered women can decide to interrupt the relationship. Regarding men, they must be educated to manage their feelings and to accept separations because relationships can finish, but the end of a romance is not a failure. As already said at the beginning, we underline that love is not irremediable, but it's a sentiment built socially. For this reason we believe that with an equal and free of gender stereotyped education, women and men can have the same tools to choose what is acceptable and satisfactory and, on the contrary, what is unequal and to be rejected.

So, as a proposal for future research and also as a strategy for prevention, it is necessary to focus our attention on socialization (Ferrer and Bosch 2013), define the process that starts at birth and goes on the whole life; a process through which, people interacting with other people, learn and internalize values, attitudes, expectations and all behaviors of the society in which people are born and live (Giddens 2001).

Lastly, taking into account the background of this study, the results obtained and the extension and relevance of this subject, future researches on sexual behavior with gender perspective are needed to dismantle fake beliefs and, especially, sexism in all its manifestations.

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