



## Bullying and Victimization: Prevalence and Gender Differences in a Sample of Iranian Middle School Students\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The main objective of this study was to determine the prevalence of bullying / victimization and gender differences in the study sample. For this purpose 564 students from middle school were selected by cluster random sampling and they completed demographic questionnaire, and Illinois Bullying Scale. Results showed that overall, 79.6% of pupils in some way - from mild to severe - are involved in bullying and about 81% are bullied as victims. In addition, 88% of students were categorized as bully/victims. Findings also showed that 85% of boys and 72% of girls somehow - from mild to severe - to have attempted bullying. Approximately, 87% of boys and 73% of girls are victims of bullying. In addition, 92% of boys and 84% of girls were identified as bully/victims. Finally, using independent t-test revealed that that in bullying and victimization is significant difference between boys and girls, in the level of 0.001. Thus, it was found that boys, more than girls, to bully others. And more boys than girls are being bullied or are bullying victims.

**Keywords:** Bullying, Victimization, Prevalence, Gender Differences

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a form of peer aggression that often occurs in schools (Smith et al., 2000) and can be defined as "negative actions—physical or verbal— that have hostile intent, are repeated over time, and involve a power differential between the bully and the victim" (Olweus, 2003). Based on research literature, two type of bullying can be specified: direct and indirect bullying (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). Among direct or overt bullying we find both physical behaviors (such as punching, pushing, hitting, kicking, destroying property, enlisting a friend to assault someone else) and verbal (such as teasing, insults, blackmail, etc.); similarly among indirect or covert bullying we find those of a physical nature (hiding property, damaging materials, stealing, etc.) and those of a verbal nature (name calling, spreading rumors) (Benitez et al., 2006).

Solberg et al. (2003) have been placed the roles related to the bullying phenomenon in four categories: bully, victim, bully/victim, and bystander. Accordingly, bully is an student that bullied other students 2 or 3 times a month; victim is the student had to have been bullied "2 or 3 times a month" and students who reported that they both had been bullied and had bullied other students "2 or 3 times a month" or more, were identified as bully/victim. Persons, who were not entitled in one of these three categories, will be considered as bystanders.

Conducted research in the field of bullying has been reported varying amounts about prevalence of bullying phenomenon. For example, data collected in Canada has shown that 8 to 9 percent of elementary school children on a regular basis (once a week or

more) have been bullied (Bentley et al., 1995). In England, Stephenson and Smith (1987, as quoted Beaty et al., 2008) found that 7 percent of their sample, were the victims, 10 percent were bullies, and 6 percent were both bully and victims. Espelage et al. (2001) the number of bullies in their research sample has been reported 14.5 percent (20 percent of boys and 7 percent of girls). In another study conducted by Fekkes et al. (2005) on 9-11 years German children it was found that 16% of children are bullied regularly, and 5.5% are active bullies. Nation et al. (2008) in a research on students in grades sixth, eighth and tenth in Italian schools were also shown that more than 9% of the students were bullies, 7% were victim, and between 3 to 4 percent were bully/victim. Results of Hilooğlu, et al. (2010) research in turkey showed that of 935 students that examined, 8.3% bully, 9.8% victim, 4.8% bully/victim, and 76.8% were bystanders. In another study, Joffre-Velazquez, et al. (2011) in Mexico showed that 20.5% of students (with average age 13.6) were victims, 13.1% were bully, and 27.4% were identified as bully/victims. Undheim et al. (2010) in a research that conducted on a sample of Norwegian students found that 10 percent of participants in study were victims of bully and 5% were bullies. Carlyle et al. (2007) also found that 20.1% of the sample was bullying victims and 18% were bullies.

Research has shown that bullying in boys more often than girls (Baldary et al., 2000; Laufer et al., 2003). For example, findings of Hilooğlu et al. (2010) show that significant differences exist between boys and girls in this phenomenon and accordingly, boys much more involved in bullying behavior. Also, Nation et al. (2008) in a study of 4386 high school students in

Italy found that bullies and bully/victims were male. Cheraghi et al. (2011) in a comparative study that investigated bullying in Iran and Turkey have reported that in samples of both countries, boys were significantly different from girls in bullying and victimization; this means that there were more boys to bully and being bullied. And a finding by Wienke-Totura et al. (2009) repeated as well. However, there are studies that have found no difference between boys and girls in bullying (e.g. Woods et al., 2005).

Because of the importance of a safe learning environment for students development and learning as well as harmful effects of bullying, also for the lack of previous systematic study in Iran on the prevalence of bullying and gender differences, this research attempts to determine the prevalence of bullying and gender differences in the sample of Iranian students.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Statistical population of the research includes all students of secondary schools of Shiraz in 2012-2013. For selecting the sample was used random cluster sampling method. Based on this method, were selected 564 students (287 boys/277girls). Because of law enforcement about change in primary schools years and increase the number of years in primary schools (from 5 to 6), the sample of this study only include second and third year students.

In this study was used Illinois Bullying Scale (Espelage et al., 2001). The scale includes 18 items that covers the various aspects of bullying phenomenon and fighting. In the present study, only the subscales of "bullying" and "victimization" were selected and implemented. The students were asked to respond on a Likert scale of 5 point values as follows: Never = 0, 1 or 2 times = 1, 3 or 4 times = 2, 5 or 6 times = 3, 7 or more times = 4. Espelage and Holt (2001) have been reported for the subscales of bullying, fighting, and victimization, Cronbach's alpha 0.87, 0.83 and 0.88 (respectively). In the present study Cronbach's alpha for the subscales and the total scale of bullying and victimization, respectively, was 0.86, 0.80, and 0.88.

## **RESULTS**

### **Question 1: What is the incidence of bullying behavior, victimization, and bully/victim?**

In order to investigate incidence of bullying phenomenon in the sample, after calculating the total score for each subject in bullying and victimization subscales, each student, based on the maximum score, and the number of attempted bullying were classified in four groups: "non-involved in the phenomenon of bullying," "mild bully", "moderate bully" and "severe bullying". Bullying Scale, has 9 items and offers five choices to participants: Never = 0,

1 or 2 times = 1, 3 or 4 times = 2, 5 or 6 times = 3, 7 or more times = 4. Minimum score on the scale, is zero that represents non-interference in phenomena of bullying (as bully, victim or bully/victim). Then, the minimum and maximum scores for those who are somehow involved in this phenomenon vary from 1 to 36; and a higher score indicate a higher attempted bullying. Information on the incidence of bullying in the total sample is presented in Table 1.

According to Table 1, slightly more than one in five of the participants are not involved in bullying. But nearly four-fifths of the students are engaged in violent behavior somehow. Of these, 60.3% are mild bully (bullying once or twice a month), 13.4% are moderate bully (bullying three or four times a month), and 5.9% are severe bully that those are 5 to 7 times or even more a month to bullying.

To investigate the incidence of victimization, the same previous step for bullying was repeated. Accordingly, victims divided into four categories based on their scores on victimization subscale: non-involved, Mild, Moderate, and severe victim. Victimization scale items, are 4 that score zero score, it means that respondent so far has been not the victim of bullying. Information about the incidence of victimization is presented in Table 2.

According to Table 2, less than one-fifth of the students participating in the study have not been bullied (18.8%). But more than four-fifths of the students have been somehow bullied. Of these 45.9% are mild victims (are bullied once or twice a month), 19% are moderate victims (are bullied three or four times a month), and 16.3% are severe victims that those are 5 to 7 times or even more a month to victimize. Also, in order to assess the existence bully/victim of the students participating in the study to calculate the score of the students in this construct Therefore, a total score was calculated as bully/victim, from individual scores on subscales of bullying and victimization which range from zero to 52. A score of zero in this component means that student is not to bully or being bullied by others (not-involved). But scores above zero, indicating the involvement of subjects in this problem. In this case, also the students were divided into four groups: "not-involved", "mild bully/victims", "moderate bully/victims", and finally "severe bully/victims". The findings related to the amount of bully/victims are presented in Table 3. According to table 3, 67 students (12%) were not involved in the bullying which means that had not been bullied and not bullied. 341 students (equivalent to 60.4% of the students are in mild group of bully/victim. 124 students (equivalent to 21.8%) are in the moderate group, and 32 students (equivalent to 5.8% of the total sample) are severe bully/victim.

**Table 1.** Descriptive findings on bullying in the total study sample

Status	Non-involved	Bully		
		Mild	Moderate	Severe
Score in bullying subscale	0	1-9	10-18	19-36
N of respondents	115	340	76	33
% Of respondents	20.4	60.3	13.4	5.9
Total percent	20.4	79.6		

**Table 2.** Descriptive findings on victimization in the total study sample.

Status	Non-involved	Victim		
		Mild	Moderate	Severe
Score in victimization subscale	0	1-4	5-8	9-16
N of respondents	106	259	107	92
% Of respondents	18.8	45.9	19	16.3
Total percent	18.8	81.2		

**Table 3.** Descriptive findings on bullying/victimization in the total study sample.

Status	Not-involved	Bully/victim		
		Mild	moderate	Severe
Score in bullying and victimization subscale	0	1-13	14-26	27-52
N of respondents	67	341	124	32
% Of respondents	12	60.4	21.8	5.8
Total percent	12	88		

**Question 2: Based on participant’s gender, how many of them are bullies, victims and bully/victims? And are significant differences between boys and girls in three bullying status?**

Occurrence of bullying, (including bullying, victimization, and bullying/ victimization) in the total sample –separated by gender- is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Descriptive findings on bullying, victimization, and bully/victim in the total study sample based on gender

Status	Gender		Severity of phenomenon				Total
			Non-involved	Mild	Moderate	Severe	
<b>Bully</b>	Boy	Number	43	161	53	30	287
		Percent	15	56.2	18.4	10.4	100
	Girl	Number	77	174	23	3	277
		Percent	27.8	62.8	8.3	1.1	100
<b>Victim</b>	Boy	Number	38	116	60	73	287
		Percent	13.3	40.4	20.9	25.5	100
	Girl	Number	73	138	47	19	277
		Percent	26.4	49.9	16.9	6.8	100
<b>Bully/victim</b>	Boy	Number	24	144	91	28	287
		Percent	8.4	50.2	31.7	9.7	100
	Girl	Number	43	197	33	4	277
		Percent	15.5	71.1	11.9	1.6	100

According to the contents of table 4, amongst groups of male students, 43 students (15%) are not involved in bullying, 161 students (equivalent to 56.2%) who are in group of mild bullies, that they have low levels of bullying behavior. Also it was found that 53 male students (equivalent to 18.4%) were moderately

involved in bullying, and 30 boys (equivalent to 10.4%) showed high (severe) levels of bullying.

As set forth the above table, it was found that 77 female students (equivalent to 17.8%) were not involved in the bullying phenomenon in any form. Also, 174 of whom (equivalent 62.8%) had mild bullying, 23 girls (equivalent to 3/8 percent) had

moderate bullying, and finally, 3 students (equivalent to 1.1%) had severe bullying.

On the subject of victimization, it was found that among boys, 38 persons (equivalent to 13.2%) are not victims of bullying, at all. It also was found that 116 boys (equivalent to 40.4%) in the mild form are victimized bullying. 60 persons (equivalent to 20.9%) of victims who fall into the middle category, and 73 students (equivalent to 25%) are victimized bullying severely. Among the girls and on the subject of victimization it was determined that 73 persons (equivalent to 26.4%) were not victims of bullying, and 138 girls (equivalent to 49.9%) were victims of bullying in mild form. In addition, was determined that 47 female students (equivalent to 16.9%), those are located in middle victimization category. Also, 19 girls (equivalent to 6.8%) as those who are severely bullied.

About the extent of bully/victim in the sample, findings showed that in males, 24 students (equivalent

to 8.4%) have no role in this phenomenon. But 144 boys (equivalent to 50.2%) are in the mild form of this state, 91 students (equivalent to 31.7%) in the moderate and 28 persons (equivalent to 9.7%) are in the severe bully – victim category.

The contents of Table 4 show that 43 female students (equivalent to 15.5%) had no role in the phenomenon of bullying in any form. Among female students, 197 students (equivalent to 71.1%) are in the mild form category of bully/victim, 33 persons (equivalent to 11.9%) are in the medium category, and 4 girls (equivalent to 1.6%) are in the severe form category of bully/victim.

Then, to verify significant differences between male and female subjects in bullying was used using an independent t-test that its results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Descriptive data related to bullying and victimization according to sex.

Status	Gender	Number	Mean	S. D.
<b>Bully</b>	Boy	287	7.48	7.36
	Girl	277	3.75	4.41
<b>Victim</b>	Boy	287	5.44	4.50
	Girl	277	2.87	3.24

**Table 6.** Results of independent T. tests to examine differences between boys and girls in bullying and victimization

Status	Gender	N	Standard Error of mean	T	D.f.	Sig.
<b>Bully</b>	Boy	287	0.43	7.27	562	0.0001
	Girl	277	0.26			
<b>Victim</b>	Boy	287	0.27	7.74	562	0.0001
	Girl	277	0.19			

Findings in Table 6, indicate that in bullying and victimization is significant difference between boys and girls, in the level of 0.001. Thus, it was found that boys, more than girls, to bully others. And more boys than girls are being bullied or are bullying victims.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings imply a high prevalence of bullying and victimization in the sample. Overall, results of this research showed that about 21 percent of the students as non-involved did not play a role in the bullying. However, a high rate of students participating in the study, were involved in the bullying phenomenon. Accordingly, 79.6% of participants, in different ways, are involved in this phenomenon; for which, can specify a range of mild to severe. Furthermore, the findings are indicated the high prevalence of victim and bully/victims in the sample;

so that only about 19 percent of students have not been bullied. Findings related to the prevalence of bullying across the world, show very different quantities. For example, Canter (2005) reported that in most schools in the United States there are bullying and its rate is about 70% of students. But other studies, have not reported such high rates. For example, Pontzer (2010) has mentioned the incidence of bullying in his sample as: bullies (23.7%), victims (19.9%) and bully/victims (9.6%). Also, Espelage et al. (2001) had been reported rate of 14.5% for bullying in their study (20% of boys and 7% of girls). In another study by Fekkes et al. (2005) was performed on children 9-11 years of German it was found that over 16% of children are bullied regularly, and 5%, are active bullies. The result of study of Jofre-Velasquez et al. (2011) showed that in Mexico, 20.5% of students

(mean age, 13.6 years) were victims, 13.1% bullies, and 27.4% were identified as bully/victims.

In general, can be said that the findings of this study have shown that along with other countries bullying and victimization are serious problems in schools participating in the study.

Table 4 and Table 6 shows that there is a difference in bullying and victimization between boys and girls and this difference is statistically significant. Accordingly, compared to girls, boys were significantly much more likely to bully and more are being bullied. These findings are consistent with vast majority of studies in this area. Because, research has shown that bully in boys is more often than girls (Gofin et al., 2002; Baldary et al., 2000, Laufer et al., 2003; Nation, 2008; Wienke-Totura et al., 2009; Cheraghi et al., 2011).

In explaining gender differences in aggressive behavior, including bullying, several explanations have been proposed. It can be noted that in three domains: hormonal explanations, explanations based on social-biological models, and social role model. According to Archer (1988, cited in Archer, 2009), being more aggressive tendencies in males can be attributed to the sex hormones testosterone. From this perspective, at least some of the gender differences in aggressive behavior are related to higher levels of testosterone in the male body. Even Primate Animal studies also confirm the case. From an evolutionary perspective, display the aggressiveness in males, occurs with the aim of demonstrating their social status and power, and thus, increase the likelihood of success in competition with other males (Archer 2009). According to the social role model, it is assumed that male aggressive behavior is learned as part of the socialization process. Based on this model, the propensity to violence and aggression in boys and men, and greater inhibition in women is mainly due to the gender role socialization (Eagly et al., 1999; Wood et al., 2002).

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