



From Policy Discourse to Gender Identity: Changes in Australian Teenagers' Attitudes toward Gender Equality and Family Roles

Kewen Yin

School of Social Science, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052, Australia
z5538100@ad.unsw.edu.au

Abstract. In Australia and around the world, gender equality, family diversity, and youth inclusion are central to contemporary social policy. And adolescence represents a critical stage for the formation of gender identity and family role expectations, shaped by institutionalized education, public policy discourse, and the increasingly influential digital media environment. Therefore, understanding how these factors interact is essential to achieving more inclusive and equitable social outcomes. This study investigates how gender equality education, policy awareness, and media exposure jointly influence Australian adolescents' gender attitudes and family role orientations. Based on Gender Socialisation Theory and risk-oriented approaches to youth media use, it explores whether structured educational participation, exposure to gender equality policies, and engagement with digital media are linked to more egalitarian gender norms. Specifically, this study employs quantitative methods, analysing AuSSA data for Australians aged 15-24 and drawing on supplementary data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Department of Education, and UN Women. Besides, multivariate regression is used to examine how education, policy awareness, and media use relate to attitudes toward gender equality and family roles. The results show that participation in gender equality education and higher levels of policy awareness is significantly associated with stronger support for gender equality and non-traditional family roles. Media exposure alone does not have a consistent effect; and it strengthens egalitarian attitudes only when combined with educational participation. In digital contexts, the interaction between educational practice, policy communication, and media literacy has a strong influence on how adolescents develop their gender attitudes.

Keywords: Australian Youth, Gender Equality Education, Policy Awareness, Media Exposure, Gender Attitudes

1 Introduction

Gender equality is a stated goal of Australian social policy, yet persistent disparities continue to characterise labour market participation, care-giving responsibilities, and exposure to gender-based harm [1]. For adolescents, these inequalities sit alongside growing public debate on equality, diversity, and inclusion, thus shaping how gender

attitudes develop. In this context, schools play a critical role in gender socialisation, serving as institutional spaces where norms regarding equality, relationships, and citizenship are formally conveyed [2]. Meanwhile, digital media strongly shape young people's identities, peer relations, and perceptions of gender norms, reinforcing both progressive and traditional norms [3,4]. As such, adolescents face gender expectations shaped by multiple and sometimes conflicting contexts. Existing studies indicate that younger cohorts express stronger support for gender equality than older generations, particularly in relation to education and employment [5]. However, views on family roles, care-giving, and intimate relationships remain mixed, hence indicating a divide between general support for equality and its practice in private life. This phenomenon has been described as an "unfinished revolution" in gender relations [5]. Previous research has explored education, policy contexts, and media environments in relation to gender attitudes, but often considers them separately. This study investigates how gender equality education, policy awareness, and media exposure together influence Australian adolescents' gender attitudes and views on family roles. In particular, it adopts a quantitative research design informed by an integrated analytical framework, drawing on nationally representative attitudinal data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), supplemented with demographic and policy context data from official sources. Using descriptive statistics and regression analysis, it deepens understanding of how education, policy awareness, and media exposure jointly shape adolescents' gender attitudes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Policy Context and Structural Issues of Gender Equality

Despite long-standing policy commitments to gender equality, structural inequalities remain embedded within Australian society. National data reveal persistent gender gaps in income, labour force participation, unpaid care work, and exposure to violence [1]. These conditions shape the broader context in which adolescents develop understandings of gender roles and expectations. Attitudinal research suggests that policy discourse alone is insufficient to ensure uniform normative change. While many young people express support for equality, these attitudes vary across gender, socioeconomic background, and cultural context [6]. Educational institutions are frequently identified as key sites for translating policy commitments into everyday socialisation processes, though implementation and outcomes vary considerably across settings [6]. Policy scholarship further highlights the tendency to frame youth through a lens of risk, particularly in relation to sexuality and digital media use. Such narratives may unintentionally reinforce gendered anxieties rather than empower young people to critically engage with social norms [4].

2.2 Adolescents' Gender Attitudes and Shifts in Family Roles

Research on youth and family change consistently identifies a tension between egalitarian ideals and persistent traditional expectations regarding care-giving and domestic

labour. Adolescents often endorse gender equality in principle while expressing ambivalence in relational and family contexts [5]. Digital media environments play an increasingly central role in this process. Social media platforms actively shape gender norms through peer validation, visibility, and algorithmic amplification, rather than merely reflecting offline attitudes [3,4]. While digital spaces can support feminist narratives and gender diversity, they also reproduce appearance-based pressures and stereotypical expectations, particularly affecting girls [7]. Studies further indicate that problematic digital practices, such as digital dating abuse, have gendered consequences, with girls experiencing greater emotional harm despite similar prevalence rates [8]. Patterns of social media use and dependence also reflect broader gender norms and relational expectations [9].

2.3 Identified Gaps and Research Objectives

Although existing research provides valuable insights into gender equality policies, youth gender attitudes, and digital media influences, several gaps remain. First, many studies examine policy contexts, educational interventions, or media environments in isolation, rather than analysing how these forces interact to shape adolescents' gender attitudes and family role orientations [6]. Second, while qualitative studies offer rich accounts of young people lived experiences of digital gendered pressures, fewer studies integrate these insights with large-scale, nationally representative attitudinal data [7]. Moreover, much of the literature tends to frame digital media either as a tool for empowerment or as a source of risk, without sufficiently examining how adolescents navigate both dimensions simultaneously within everyday media environments [4]. This limits our understanding of how policy discourse, school-based gender equality education, and routine media exposure jointly shape young people's perceptions of gender norms and family roles. This study addresses these gaps by examining the combined effects of gender equality education participation, policy awareness, and media exposure on Australian adolescents' gender equality attitudes and family role orientations. Using data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes supplemented by national demographic and policy sources, the research aims to provide an integrated empirical analysis of how macro-level policy discourse intersects with micro-level processes of youth gender socialisation in a digitalised social context.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Rationale

This study investigates the factors shaping gender attitudes through the measurement, comparison, and statistical modeling of large-scale adolescent data. Recent national surveys have shown large gender attitude gaps among youth. For instance, the 2021 National Community Attitudes Survey (NCAS) revealed that 91% of Australians aged 16 to 24 consider violence against women a serious issue. However, compared with public spheres like work and politics, young people show weaker support for gender

equality in private spheres such as housework and relationships. These differences can be analyzed through data to uncover the patterns of attitude changes.

In addition, data from the ABS reflects the reality of societal gender structures. For instance, the gender pay gap in Australia remains at 8.4%, and there is a notable disparity in labor force participation between men (67.8%) and women (60.6%). Besides, the behaviors of young people in using digital media are highly quantifiable. Data indicates that 97% of Australian youth use social media daily, allowing for the measurement of media exposure through specific variables such as duration of use, platform type, and interaction patterns. By combining survey data, demographic information, and platform data analysis, the quantitative design of this study enables a robust examination of the independent effects of education, policy, and media on adolescent gender attitudes, as well as their interactions.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection Approaches

To ensure robust and valid analysis, five primary data sources are integrated. The core dataset is the 2022 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) on Changes in Family and Gender Roles [10], which includes variables relevant to this study, such as attitudes toward family roles, working mothers, dual-income households, same-sex families, gender perceptions, policy exposure, and media usage. Besides, the sample is drawn from respondents aged 15 to 24.

Furthermore, demographic statistics provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provide crucial background information, including the gender pay gap, male and female employment rates, and the youth population aged 15 to 24, as shown in Table 1. Although not dependent variables, these data offer structural context for analyzing adolescent attitudes and help account for demographic heterogeneity in subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Australian Demographic and Employment-Related Statistics

Statistical Indicator	Specific Data
Gender Pay Gap	8.4%
Male Employment Rate	67.8%
Female Employment Rate	60.6%
Youth Population	Approximately 3.2 million (ages 15-24)

Besides, data from the Australian Department of Education offers crucial support [11]. The relevant data includes information on the implementation of gender equality courses, regional differences in gender equality education programs, and student participation in respectful relationships education. And these data help evaluate the extent of participation in gender equality education and its effects. Moreover, reports from UN Women Australia reveal the level of youth engagement with the gender equality movement and their involvement in advocacy and leadership initiatives [12]. Utilizing these data, a policy awareness index was constructed to assess adolescents' understanding of gender equality policies. Besides, content analysis of social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, enriched the data sources for this research. By analyzing hashtags,

content types, user interaction intensity, and the spread of content related to gender equality and family roles within youth groups on these platforms, the study enhances and strengthens the measurement of media exposure.

3.3 Key Variable Definition and Measurement

This study operationalises key concepts using composite indices to capture adolescents’ participation in gender equality education, policy awareness, media exposure, and attitudinal outcomes. Variables are categorised into independent, dependent, and control variables, with all indices standardised on a 0–100 scale to facilitate comparison.

Independent Variables. The independent variables are the Gender Equality Education Participation Index (GEEPI), the Policy Awareness Index (PAI), and the Media Exposure Index (MEI), each constructed using standardized indicators and formulas to quantify adolescents’ participation, awareness, and media exposure. In particular, GEEPI measures participation in gender equality education by combining course attendance, frequency, content awareness, and evaluation of educational materials. Scoring criteria are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Gender Equality Education Participation Indicators

Indicator Description	Scoring Range
Has the respondent received gender equality or respectful relationships education?	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Frequency of participation	1 = Never, 5 = Very Frequently
Level of awareness of course content	1 = Not familiar at all, 5 = Very familiar
Evaluation of the quality of educational materials	1 = Very poor, 5 = Very good

The weighted composite index ranges from 0 to 100, and the formula is as follows.

$$GEEPI=0.4(CourseTaken)+0.2\left(\frac{Frequency-1}{4}\right)+0.2\left(\frac{Awareness-1}{4}\right)+0.2\left(\frac{Quality-1}{4}\right) \quad (1)$$

Besides, PAI measures adolescents’ awareness and involvement in gender equality policies. This index is based on their knowledge of the national gender equality strategy, the frequency of exposure to relevant information from government or non-governmental organizations, and their self-assessed understanding of gender equality policies. The indicators are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Policy Awareness Index Indicators

Indicator Description	Scoring Range
Awareness of the national gender equality strategy	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Frequency of exposure to relevant information from government or NGOs	0 = Never exposed, 5 = Very frequently
Self-assessment of understanding of gender equality policies	1 = Not familiar at all, 5 = Very familiar

The final index ranges from 0 to 100, and the calculation formula is as follows.

$$PAI = 0.5(\text{Awareness}) = 0.3\left(\frac{\text{Exposure}}{5}\right) = 0.2\left(\frac{\text{Understanding}-1}{4}\right) \quad (2)$$

The MEI combines self-reported media exposure and platform-level exposure data. Self-reported exposure includes factors like daily social media usage duration, weekly frequency of encountering gender-related content, and the number of platforms used. Platform-level exposure is measured through hashtag frequency, the proportion of equality-related content shared, and engagement intensity. The Self Media Exposure Index (MEI_{Self}) and Platform-Level Exposure Index (MEI_{platform}) are calculated as follows.

$$MEI_{\text{Self}} = 0.4\left(\frac{\text{Hours}}{6}\right) + 0.4\left(\frac{\text{ContentFreq}}{7}\right) + 0.2\left(\frac{\text{Platforms}}{5}\right) \quad (3)$$

$$MEI_{\text{platform}} = 0.5(\text{Hastag Score}) + 0.3(\text{Content Share}) + 0.2(\text{Engagement}) \quad (4)$$

The final MEI is the weighted average of self-reported and platform-level exposure data, calculated as follows:

$$MEI = 0.5MEI_{\text{Self}} + 0.5MEI_{\text{platform}} \quad (5)$$

These measurements of the independent variables provide a quantitative basis for analyzing adolescents' participation in gender equality education, policy awareness, and media engagement.

Dependent Variables. The dependent variables include the Gender Equality Attitude Index (GEAI) and the Family Role Orientation Index (FROI). These two indicators are used to measure adolescents' attitudes toward gender equality and their orientation toward family roles, respectively. Each dependent variable is measured via specific items and standardized methods, quantifying the respondents' attitudes and views.

The GEAI is constructed based on several items from the AuSSA. This index aims to assess respondents' views on gender equality and includes questions like "Men and women should have equal opportunities in the workplace," "Women are just as capable as men in leadership roles," "Gender equality has not yet been achieved," and "Husbands should not have more influence in family decision-making than wives." For items with traditionalist tendencies, reverse coding is applied. The scores for all items are summed to form the raw GEAI, which is then converted into a 0-to-100 score using a range normalization method. The final formula is as follows:

$$GEAI = \frac{\text{Raw} - \text{Raw}_{\min}}{\text{Raw}_{\max} - \text{Raw}_{\min}} * 100 \quad (6)$$

To ensure data reliability, an internal consistency check was conducted, requiring Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$.

Besides, FROI is based on items measuring adolescents' attitudes toward family roles, including support for working mothers, acceptance of non-traditional family

structures, views on household labor division, and recognition of equal parenting. Raw scores are summed to form the FROI, calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{FROI} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k \text{Item}_i}{k} \quad (7)$$

Then, the raw FROI value is converted into a range from 0 to 100 through a standardization method, with the following formula:

$$\text{FROI} = \frac{\text{FROI}_{\text{raw}} - 1}{4} * 100 \quad (8)$$

The measurement of these two dependent variables provides clear quantitative indicators for the study, helping to analyze adolescents' attitudes and views on gender equality and family roles.

Control Variables and Data Reliability. Gender, ethnicity, region, education, and socioeconomic background are control variables to adjust for their effect on adolescents' gender attitudes. All key variables are based on self-reported survey data and may be affected by biases such as social desirability, which can lead respondents to overstate support for gender equality, and recall bias in reporting educational participation or media exposure. To mitigate these limitations, the study constructs composite indices from multiple items, phrases questions to capture general attitudes and specific evaluations, and incorporates demographic controls in regression analyses to adjust for systematic differences across groups. These measures enhance the reliability and robustness of the findings while acknowledging that self-report bias cannot be completely eliminated.

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation Methods

Hypotheses are tested using descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, subgroup analysis, and visualization to examine adolescents' attitudes toward gender equality, policy awareness, and media exposure.

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize the means and distributions of the GEAI, FROI, GEEPI, PAI, and MEI. Through visual tools such as histograms, box plots, and bar charts, the distribution differences and trends of these variables across different groups were clearly observed. Correlation analysis, using Pearson's correlation matrix, examined the linear relationships between variables and tested for potential multicollinearity issues. Correlation heatmaps and scatter plot matrices helped illustrate the strength and direction of these relationships.

Regression modeling was used to verify the impact of independent variables on dependent variables. Two regression models were set up to analyze the relationships between the GEAI and FROI with independent variables like Gender Equality Education Participation, Policy Awareness, and Media Exposure. The regression analysis provided coefficients, standardized coefficients, p-values, significance levels, confidence intervals, and adjusted R^2 , which helped us quantitatively understand the relationships between variables. The specific formulas for the regression models are as follows:

$$GEAI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GEEPI_i + \beta_2 PAI_i + \beta_3 MEI_i + \beta_4 Controls_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{9}$$

$$FROI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GEEPI_i + \beta_2 PAI_i + \beta_3 MEI_i + \beta_4 Controls_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{10}$$

Additionally, subgroup analysis was conducted by stratifying the data based on factors such as gender, residence area, and cultural diversity, helping to identify differences in gender equality attitudes across different groups. Specific differences across groups were displayed using coefficient comparison plots and predicted marginal plots. The study also employed visual tools such as regression coefficient plots, correlation heatmaps, labeled frequency word clouds, grouped bar charts, and diagnostic plots to further present the key relationships and trends within the data.

4 Results and Analysis

4.1 Adolescent Gender Attitudes and Perceptions of Family Roles

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables. Overall, Australian adolescents exhibit relatively high levels of support for gender equality, reflected in a mean GEAI score of 71.4 (SD = 12.6). In contrast, attitudes toward family roles are more heterogeneous, with a lower mean FROI score of 63.7 (SD = 15.9), indicating greater variation in views related to caregiving and domestic responsibilities.

Furthermore, group comparisons reveal consistent differences. Female adolescents report higher mean scores on both the GEAI (75.8) and FROI (67.2) compared to their male counterparts (GEAI = 67.9; FROI = 60.1). Similarly, adolescents living in metropolitan areas and those from culturally diverse backgrounds exhibit higher average scores on both indices. These descriptive findings suggest that while gender equality is broadly supported at a normative level, attitudes toward family roles show greater variation across different social groups.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
GEAI	71.4	12.6	28.3	96.8
FROI	63.7	15.9	22.1	94.2
GEEPI	54.2	21.4	0	100
PAI	48.9	19.6	0	100
MEI	61.8	23.7	5.4	100

4.2 The Direct Effects of Education, Policy, and Media on Gender Attitudes

Table 5 displays the results of the multivariate regression analysis, which examine the direct impact of gender equality education participation, policy awareness, and media exposure on adolescents' gender attitudes and family role perceptions. Among these factors, gender equality education participation (GEEPI) demonstrates the largest

standardized effect in both models. Specifically, for gender equality attitudes, GEEPI is positively associated with the GEAI ($\beta = 0.29$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), and a similarly strong relationship is observed for family role orientations ($\beta = 0.25$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$).

Besides, policy awareness demonstrates a significant positive relationship with both outcome variables. Higher levels of policy awareness are linked to stronger gender equality attitudes ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and more egalitarian family role orientations ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). Media exposure, by contrast, has a weaker effect. While MEI is positively associated with GEAI ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.031$), its relationship with FROI is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The models explain a substantial portion of the variance in adolescent attitudes, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.35 for GEAI and 0.29 for FROI. Thus, education participation and policy awareness emerge as the most influential predictors, while media exposure demonstrates a relatively limited direct effect.

Table 5. Regression Results for Predictors of Gender Attitudes and Family Roles

Predictor	β	SE	p-value
GEEPI	0.29	0.04	<0.001
PAI	0.22	0.05	<0.001
MEI	0.08	0.04	0.031
Female	0.18	0.05	<0.001

4.3 The Conditional Mechanisms and Group Difference Effects

Table 6 examines whether media exposure moderates the relationship between gender equality education participation and gender attitudes. The interaction term between GEEPI and MEI is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.009$), suggesting that the link between education participation and gender equality attitudes differs depending on the level of media exposure.

Specifically, the main effect of education participation remains significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), while media exposure alone does not have a statistically significant effect ($p > 0.05$). Moreover, the inclusion of the interaction term improves the model’s explanatory power, with the adjusted R^2 rising to 0.37. In addition, subgroup comparisons reveal that the effect of education participation on GEAI is stronger among female adolescents and those living in metropolitan areas compared to their peers. And these findings suggest that the impact of gender equality education varies across groups and may be enhanced under specific social and media conditions.

Table 6. Moderating Effects of Media Exposure on the Relationship Between Education Participation and Gender Attitudes

Predictor	β	SE	p-value
GEEPI	0.21	0.05	<0.001
MEI	0.05	0.04	0.184
GEEPI \times MEI	0.15	0.06	0.009

5 Conclusion

This study used national survey data plus policy and media context to examine how gender equality education, policy awareness, and media exposure shape Australian adolescents' gender attitudes and family role views. The results show that adolescents who participated in structured gender equality and respectful relationships education, and who had higher awareness of relevant policies, generally exhibited stronger egalitarian attitudes and were more open to non-traditional family roles. In contrast, the effect of media exposure was more conditional, further reinforcing egalitarian attitudes only when educational participation was high, while its independent effect was weaker and less consistent. These findings suggest that education and policy function as core institutional mechanisms of socialization, whereas media plays an enhancing role under specific circumstances. However, the study primarily relies on cross-sectional self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and limits causal inference. Future studies could use longitudinal and qualitative methods to track changes in gender attitudes and explore intersectional differences, offering a deeper understanding of adolescent gender socialization.

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