



## Moral Responsibility of Bystander Role in The Midst of Bullying: A Gender-Based Cross-Sectional Survey

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**Abstract:** The bystander effect is the tendency of individuals to not respond to emergencies by helping, defending, or stopping them. Bullying is a sign that someone is in real and imminent danger. Efforts to involve bystanders in intervention will determine whether bullying becomes more severe or even does not occur if they have a moral involvement to their surroundings. This study will highlight the role of bystanders in bullying incidents, whether there is a correlation between the role of bystanders and gender, and how bystanders view bullying from a moral perspective. The research method uses a descriptive quantitative research design that will describe and explain the role of bystanders in bullying incidents. The research data was collected from 104 students aged 12-15 years with instrument bystander bullying role scale 37 items. This scale consists of bystander roles like defender, assistant, outsider, aggressive defender, and reinforcer. The assistant and reinforcer roles showed pro-bullying with findings of 5% and 42% in the moderate category. The defender and aggressive defender roles showed anti-bullying with findings of 22% and 56% in the moderate category. Meanwhile, the outsider role, which is the core of passive bystanders, was found to be 49% in the moderate category and 27% in the high category. The  $r$  value obtained was  $0.036 < 0.195$ , indicating a weak correlation between bystander roles and gender. The various observer roles in both genders show that the bystander role can be performed by anyone and that there are individual characteristics that inhibit, reinforce, or are indifferent to bullying incidents. From a moral point of view, these findings show that it is important to develop a sense of moral responsibility and encourage bystanders to intervene on behalf of bullying victims, especially in the role of outsiders.

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying incidents that occur overtly or hidden and even undetected show the need for a deeper understanding of the various parties involved in this dynamic. This is because bullying has a significant impact on various health and psychosocial problems, especially in educational environments. A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Moore et al. (2017) shows that there are various serious consequences of being a victim of bullying, ranging from depression, anxiety, self-harm, to increased suicidal ideation and attempts by almost 4 times. This phenomenon has received widespread attention in recent years mainly because of the increase in incidents in various social and community environments, especially in educational settings. The definition of bullying offered by

Olweus (1997) has been widely accepted and developed, namely that a student is bullied or victimized when he or she is repeatedly exposed to negative actions carried out by one or more other students. This indicates several main triggers in bullying, namely aggressive behavior, repetition, and imbalance of power. The main motivation for bullies is the pursuit of status and a dominant position within the group, so this "strategy" is considered successful because it demonstrates their position and popularity within the group (Salmivalli, 2010).

In bullying situations, there are other actors besides the perpetrator and victim, such as the bully's assistant, behavior reinforcer, outsider, and defender. According to Jenkins & Tennant (2023), the presence of bystanders plays an important role in determining whether the bullying will continue, subside, or be stopped immediately. The role of bystanders in bullying incidents needs to be given attention, because their presence often determines the direction of an incident. When bystanders choose to remain silent, it indirectly provides validation or reinforcement of the perpetrator's actions, and conversely, if they dare to take a stand to defend, reprimand or report, it has great potential in efforts to stop bullying incidents. According to Lauren, in general, students who are not perpetrators or victims tend to remain silent because they are afraid of becoming the next victim or being negatively stigmatized by other friends (Najiba, Saryuti, & Astuti, 2025).

Bystander that is said to be active such as seeing the incident, helping the perpetrator, defending the victim or reporting the incident to the teacher in charge. While passive bystander behavior is students who ignore bullying incidents, pretend not to know and do not interfere, avoid the incident, leave the victim (Waasdorp, Fu, Clary, & Bradshaw, 2022). Many factors influence bystander actions such as teacher presence, teacher attention, school openness, positive engagement with students (Waasdorp et al., 2022). The presence of peers is also important and is the greatest support both moral and mental support that can be given to others (Maharani, Maharani, Aulia, Putri, & Suharto, 2024). Often bystanders are faced with a moral dilemma "whether to help the victim, remain silent or indirectly reinforce the actions of the perpetrator".

This dilemma is in line with the opinion of Darley & Latane (1968) who stated that the more bystanders there are in an emergency situation, the less likely or the slower one of them will be to provide assistance. This is known as diffusion of responsibility, which occurs when a person is the only witness and therefore bears full responsibility for helping. However, when there are many witnesses, the responsibility seems to be shared among everyone present, resulting in each individual feeling less personally responsible for taking action. Bullying situations that are carried out openly by perpetrators in a school environment make students who see or are in the same place as the incident key witnesses. This is because sometimes victims are threatened not to report the incident, therefore the role of bystanders in reporting is important and requires their honesty (Black, Weinles, & Washington, 2010; Khasanah, Khotimah, Masse, & Annadia, 2023).

Researchers have overlooked a number of possibilities in providing holistic bullying interventions by considering only the perpetrator and victim sides through a number of psychological approaches, character education, and school programs (Wibowo, Fijriani, & Krisnanda, 2021). In addition to this support, there needs to be an effective spontaneous

reaction in an effort to control the bullying situation, such as defending the victim, stopping the perpetrator, reporting the incident to the teacher, and providing emotional support. Spontaneous reactions, or what can also be called empathetic responses from peer groups, especially observers who witness bullying directly, can be effective in directing such emergency situations (Raboteg-Šaric, 2019).

Research conducted by Crutcher et al. states that bystander bullying has a big role in directing the incidence of bullying or the more students in the class side with the perpetrator as well as ignorant behavior towards him, the higher the level of bullying and vice versa if the behavior of defenders and active in the classroom, there are fewer incidents of bullying (Najiba et al., 2025; Thornberg, Pozzoli, & Gini, 2022). In line with research conducted by Rianti in Palupi et al. (2025) concluded that support in creating a positive climate in schools can reduce the level of bullying through various considerations and policy development. A positive friendship environment can provide support to victims of bullying, firmly reject bullying behavior and be active in reporting incidents to the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher and class teacher (Febrianti, Syaputra, & Oktara, 2024). Open spaces for reporting bullying incidents committed by both victims and bystanders must be available in order to create a conducive atmosphere and reduce the severity of bullying incidents or even eliminate them altogether. Therefore, bystander-based interventions need to be carried out in order to design observer-centered interventions and increase students' empathetic responsiveness to their surroundings.

The bystander intervention model proposed by Darley & Latane (1968) utilizes the concepts of diffusion of responsibility, social influence, and evaluation apprehension. The bystander intervention model developed by Latane and Darley requires several steps before effective decision-making, including awareness of the event, interpretation as an emergency, acceptance of responsibility, knowing how to help, and implementation of the decision (Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). The main pillar in this model, which is a strong psychological barrier, is how a bystander feels and takes responsibility and makes a spontaneous intervention, known as the diffusion of responsibility phenomenon. This phenomenon explains how the presence of many other witnesses significantly reduces each individual's sense of personal obligation to help.

A study conducted by Salmivalli (2014) shows that women are more often nominated as defenders of victims, while a classic study conducted by (Darley & Latane, 1968) found no significant difference between men and women in reporting emergencies. This inconsistency highlights an important gap in the literature, especially regarding the role of bystanders and gender in bullying situations. Therefore, this study aims to specifically investigate the level of bystander bullying, whether there are differences between the two genders, and how moral responsibility of bystanders occurs in both genders. This is expected to form the basis for designing gender-based bystander bullying interventions to understand behavioral role variations more comprehensively so that they are more adaptive and socially relevant, ultimately fostering safer school environments and promoting proactive student engagement in preventing bullying incidents, while also providing valuable insights for counselors, educators, and policymakers in developing targeted

strategies that address the unique psychological and social dynamics influencing bystander behavior.

## METHOD

Researchers hypothesize that there is a significant correlation between the role of observers and gender, based on previous findings (Darley & Latane, 1968; Salmivalli, 2014). The research was conducted through a survey approach with a cross-sectional survey design. This design was chosen because researchers only collect data at one point in time. According to Creswell (2012) cross-sectional survey design can be used for research on attitudes, beliefs, opinions or current practices. The steps in survey research generally begin with identifying the research topic to be raised, conducting a literature review, developing research questions (initial interviews), developing survey instruments (questionnaires), selecting participants in the population and sample, testing and managing survey results, analyzing and interpreting survey results (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006).

The determination of the sample was carried out through purposive sampling by determining certain considerations, selecting certain cases to be included in the sample, and only aiming to meet the specific needs of the researcher, rather than relying on random selection, which may not capture the required information (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Suriani, Risnita, & Jailani, 2023). Purposive sampling was chosen because this study aims to obtain in-depth and rich insights that have specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences that are highly relevant to this topic (Lenaini, 2021). Although this will limit the ability to generalize the data, this method ensures rich data on observer behavior in a real-world context. Purposive sampling used by researchers considers reports from Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers who have experienced bullying in the classroom. From the report, bullying was found in four classes, namely in two classes, grades 7 and 8. The completion of the instrument had been approved by the BK teachers, and students were given an informed consent form and assured that the data collected was anonymous and only for research purposes.

This study used the Bystander Role Scale (BRS) instrument developed and adapted from the Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ) which showed high reliability ( $\alpha=0.85$ ) in trials with confirmatory factor analysis that validated the five-role structure (Raboteg-Šarić, 2019). There are 37 items with indicators of bystander roles such as aggressive defender, defender, reinforcer, assistant, and outsider. Items use a 3-criteria Likert scale, including (0) never, (1) sometimes, (2), often. The samples used were students of MTs Negeri 2 Sidoarjo grades 7 and 8. The researcher used the SPSS (v.26) application to perform Pearson's correlation test in assessing the relationship between bystander roles and gender. Correlational analysis is a statistical analysis that seeks to find the relationship or influence between two variables. Through the correlation test, researchers can find out whether there is a significant relationship between two variables and the direction of the relationship whether positive or negative (Hermanto, Gio, & dkk, 2024). Correlational analysis is important to find out how the relationship between bystander roles and gender types in students.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Bystander Effect in Bullying

The bystander effect is a condition in which individuals merely observe, are unable to respond, do nothing, or help someone in an emergency, and tend to act when alone rather than in crowded situations. This is due to the diffusion of responsibility that occurs when many people are present (Atjo & Tetteng, 2024). Bullying becomes an emergency situation when violence, oppression, or physical fights occur, causing direct and tangible impacts. The bystander effect falls under the category of psychosocial phenomena because the behavior must understand the internal psychological and external social dimensions of the environment (Julinar, Syarif, & Aiyuda, 2024).

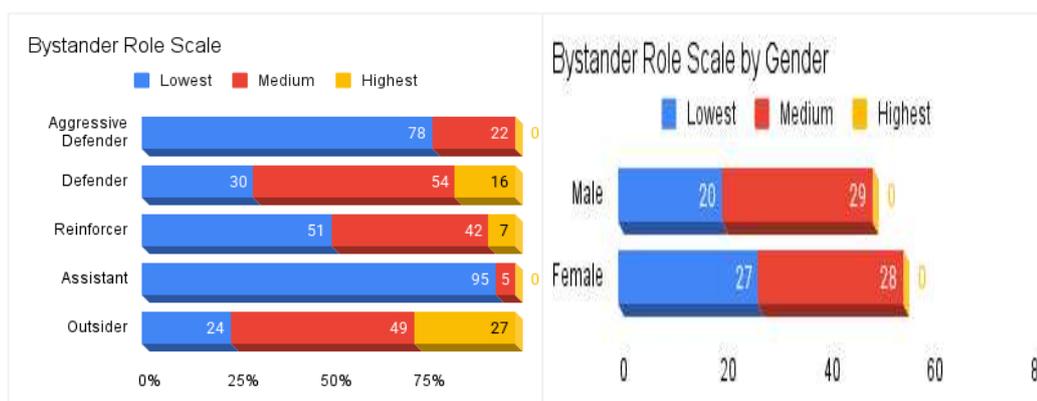
Bullying is seen as a form of proactive aggression that is carried out in a planned manner to achieve a goal. Bullies strategically choose victims who are weak, unpopular, and unable to defend themselves; when victims display the expected passive behavior, the bullies will continue to bully them (Ainiyah & Cahyanti, 2020; Salmivalli, 2010). Data trends found in the review by Rettew & Pawlowski (2022) shows that bullying most often occurs in school environments; second, the peak incidence of bullying occurs in junior high school and early adolescence. One program to reduce bullying is based on the results of a meta-analysis, namely a comprehensive, multifaceted program involving peer participation, which tends to show better results. Peer involvement was chosen because bullying is a group process that often occurs in front of other students (bystanders) (Xie, Jiang, & Cui, 2024).

According to Salmivalli (2010) Most students actually oppose bullying, but according to him, there are several reasons why defending victims rarely occurs. Some of his findings are: first, students who witness incidents tend to think that bullying occurs because of the victim's own mistakes; second, fear of taking the risk of opposing the perpetrator, who is often popular and powerful, so bystanders feel safer to stay away; third, considering the bullying situation to be a joke, so they ignore the victim; and fourth is the bystander effect, where the presence of witnesses can cause diffusion of responsibility, whereby witnesses to the incident think that someone else will save the victim or take responsibility for acting. In line with the research Darley & Latane (1968) which concludes that witnesses who rarely defend victims are not people who are indifferent to the incident, but rather their response to the presence of other people, resulting in a failure to provide assistance.

In the social context of the school environment, the roles of bystanders are not uniform. Further research was conducted by Raboteg-Šaric (2019) and Salmivalli (2014) has found that there are several roles in the occurrence of bullying, namely the bully or bullying actor, the bully's assistant, the reinforcer of bullying behavior, the role of the defender of the bully victim, an outsider or someone who is only silent during the incident, the victim of bullying. The researcher managed to find a number of roles with low, medium and high criteria with the exception of the role of the perpetrator and victim of bullying and the addition of the aggressive defender aspect. In the lowest aspect, it was found that the role of assistant perpetrator was 95% of the sample, but it was still found in the medium category at 5%. Regarding the role of the observer, it was found in the aspect of outsiders

with each high category at 27%. This proves that there are still passive individuals who are just silent without having any feelings to help stop bullying incidents.

Research conducted by Darley and Latane shows that bystanders have negative pressure due to the diffusion of responsibility among bystanders, in contrast to Fahmi's research, which emphasizes the positive perspective of the presence of bystanders (Ashilah, 2025). This positive view emphasizes that in dangerous or emergency situations, the presence of bystanders around the incident can trigger them to provide assistance.. Raboteg-Šaric (2019) provides the view that bystanders have three different roles that they have successfully identified, namely the pro-bully, pro-victim, and neutral roles. The pro-bully and pro-victim roles fall into the category of active bystanders who actively support the victim or the perpetrator. Meanwhile, the neutral role is those who fall into the category of passive bystanders, who are indifferent to the bullying situation, tend to avoid the incident, or just watch the situation (Ferdinand, Soetikno, & Uranus, 2024; W. D. Lestari, Anggriana, & Pratama, 2022).



**Graph 1.** Bystander Bullying Role

**Graph 2.** Bystander Bullying by Gender

The results of the survey conducted by the researcher are shown in Graph 1, which shows that the overall level of bystander bullying roles was found to range from aggressive defender, defender, reinforcer, assistant, to outsider. The five roles found above show different roles in bullying incidents in the field. The survey was conducted based on the findings of guidance counselors in the classroom that bullying had occurred in the classroom. Figure 2 shows the findings that have been processed based on gender. The researchers collected data on gender, age, and class (Graph 2), which revealed the interaction between the three in relation to bystander roles.

The demographic data covers students aged 12-15 years in grades 7 and 8 of MTs. From the survey instrument using the bystander role scale, it was found that 27% of girls had a low bystander role and 28% had a moderate role, while 20% of boys had a low role and 29% had a moderate role in dealing with bullying. Although male and female students showed the same level of moderate observer involvement, the higher percentage of low roles among females (20% vs. 27%) may reflect gender-based socialization—for example, girls tend to avoid confrontation (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Next, a correlation test was conducted between the bystander role and gender (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Correlation between Bystander Role and Gender

Correlations		Bystander Role Scale	Gender
Bystander Role Scale (BRS)	Pearson Correlation	1	,036
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,715
	N	104	104
Gender	Pearson Correlation	,036	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,715	
	N	104	104

Table 1 shows the results of data processing through SPSS by testing the correlation between the bystander role and gender. The results obtained are the calculated  $r$  value of  $0.036 < r$  table  $0.195$  and sig. (2 tailed)  $0.715 > 0.05$  or weakly correlated. The correlation test results show that there is no statistical evidence that gender affects the role of bystanders ( $p > 0.05$ ). The test was continued with a Three-Way ANOVA test that compared differences based on gender and class separately and looked at the interaction between the two.

**Table 2.** Three-Way ANOVA Test using SPSS

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power <sup>b</sup>
Corrected Model	1635,209 <sup>a</sup>	14	116,801	1,827	,046	25,585	,892
Intercept	24754,152	1	24754,152	387,306	,000	387,306	1,000
Gender	,027	1	,027	,000	,984	,000	,050
Age	166,428	3	55,476	,868	,461	2,604	,232
Grade	46,936	1	46,936	,734	,394	,734	,136
Gender * Age	151,273	3	50,424	,789	,503	2,367	,214
Gender * Grade	59,197	1	59,197	,926	,338	,926	,159
Age * Grade	924,275	3	308,092	4,820	,004	14,461	,892
Gender * Age * Grade	167,182	2	83,591	1,308	,276	2,616	,276
Error	5688,320	89	63,914				
Total	70093,000	104					
Corrected Total	7323,529	103					

Table 2 shows the results of the three-way ANOVA test with the first finding, the three-way interpretation producing a  $p$ -value for the interaction of gender, age, and grade of  $0.276$ . Because this is  $> 0.05$ , there is no significant three-way interaction effect, meaning that the pattern of interaction between age and grade on BRS is consistent for both male and female students. The second is the interpretation of the two-way interaction; gender and age show a value of  $0.503 > 0.05$ , meaning that the influence of gender on BRS scores is consistent across all age groups (no interaction); gender and grade  $0.338 > 0.05$ , meaning that the influence of gender on BRS scores is consistent across both grade levels (no interaction); while age and grade show a value of  $0.004 < 0.05$ , meaning there is a significant interaction effect between age and grade on BRS scores. This means that the influence of age on bystander behavior differs significantly depending on the grade level of the student.

Table 2 also shows the observed power or statistical power that a statistical test will successfully detect a real effect or difference, if the effect or difference actually exists in

the population. For the gender variable, the observed power is 0.050. This power value is very low, which means that this study only has a 5% chance of detecting a real difference between men and women or does not have sufficient power to detect the difference, so a larger sample size is needed for further research.

In this research sample, there was insufficient statistical evidence to support the existence of differences in bystander roles caused by class level, gender, age, or a combination of the three factors. However, these findings do not rule out the influence of contextual factors that may moderate this relationship. Contextual factors can moderate the relationship between gender and bystander roles, such as the type of bullying (physical/verbal/social), personal relationships with the victim (new gender effects may emerge when the victim is a close friend, for example, women are more likely to defend female friends than men defend male friends), and the number of bystanders who witness the incident (the diffusion of responsibility effect may have a stronger influence on one gender, for example, men may feel less pressure to act when they are in a group of other men, while the same does not apply to women).

### Bystander Role in Bullying

Previous quantitative findings describe the social stage of bystander roles, gender, class, and age in terms of numbers and the relationship between the three. The above findings are an interpretation of the overall data on bystander roles. Next, bystander roles are explained in more detail. Raboteg-Šaric (2019) successfully categorized bystander roles based on behavioral responses, namely active and passive roles. In the active role, there are two opposing categories, namely the pro-bully active role and the pro-victim active role. The first is the pro-bully behavioral response, a category of students who support the perpetrator either actively or passively, or a category of reinforcement. Pro-bully behavioral responses vary, such as laughing, holding the victim, joking about the incident, and others that lead to the reinforcement of the bullying situation or indirectly support the perpetrator's behavior (Álvarez-García, Thornberg, & Suárez-García, 2021; Devica, Putri, Kunardi, Tanujaya, & W, 2024).



**Figure 1.** Survey of bullying behavior in schools with guidance counselors (left), and Bystander bullying survey using the Bystander Role Scale instrument (right).

Broadly speaking, pro-bullying responses can be divided into two categories: reinforcing roles and assisting roles. The enabler role can take the form of intentional or unintentional actions such as joining in, supporting the perpetrator, dismissing it as a joke, laughing, participating in the bullying, or watching because it is funny and entertaining. The assistant role, on the other hand, involves intentional and direct support for the perpetrator without being the main executor, such as holding the victim down or watching to see if anyone reports the incident (Howard, Landau, & Pryor, 2014). Furthermore, based on the findings, the researchers conducted a comparative analysis between the two genders for the role of enforcer (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Gender Comparison Analysis for Reinforcing Roles

Category	Male (n=49)	Female (n=55)	Key Differences
Lowest	36.7%	63.6%	The majority of women clearly do not support bullying.
Medium	51%	34.5%	Ambivalence is much more dominant in men.
Highest	12.2%	1.8%	Active reinforcing behavior is much more common in men.

These results strongly indicate the existence of gender norms in responding to bullying. Among male students, providing passive or occasional support to bullies appears to be more socially acceptable. Conversely, among female students, prevailing norms place greater pressure on such behavior. These findings are consistent with findings that girls consistently report higher levels of empathy (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019). Next is a comparative analysis between the two genders for the role of bully assistant (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Gender Comparison Analysis for the Role of Assistant Bully

Category	Male (n=49)	Female (n=55)	Key Differences
Lowest	98%	92.7%	Absolute dominance in both genders, which is highly non-normative
Medium	2%	7.3%	Slightly more noticeable in women
Highest	0%	0%	Highly non-normative

The results of the comparative analysis show that the most notable point is in the low category, indicating that almost all students consciously do not take steps to actively join the main perpetrators when bullying occurs. Although very rare in both genders, occasional assistant behavior was reported slightly more often by females. This may reflect assistants in relational aggression (such as spreading gossip) being more common among females than direct physical assistants.

The second behavioral response is active pro-victim bystander, which consists of various actions that directly or indirectly support the victim of bullying. Broadly speaking, this response is divided into two types: defensive behavior and aggressive defensive behavior. Defensive behavior is demonstrated by direct actions such as diverting attention, assertively reprimanding the perpetrator (“stop it,” “leave him alone,” “that's not funny”), physically intervening; as well as indirect behaviors such as accompanying the victim, providing emotional support (“what he did was wrong,” “I'm sorry you had to go through that”), reporting to the teacher (Raboteg-Šaric, 2019). Meanwhile, aggressive defenders tend to use retaliatory aggression against perpetrators, such as responding to insults,

threatening perpetrators, pushing or attacking perpetrators. Despite their intentions to defend, this role carries a high risk of exacerbating the conflict and could turn them into victims or new perpetrators.

**Table 5.** Gender Comparison Analysis for the Role of Aggressive Defender

Category	Male (n=49)	Female (n=55)	Key Differences
Lowest	77.6%	78.2%	Consistently refuses to use aggression to defend victims
Medium	22.4%	21.8%	Occasionally may use more confrontational or aggressive methods
Highest	0%	0%	No students consistently identify themselves as aggressive defenders

Based on the survey results, it can be interpreted that the role of aggressive defender that is, defending the victim by retaliating against the perpetrator is a behavior that is very uncommon and not supported by social norms among students, both male and female (Table 5). With more than 77% of students in both genders falling into the low category and no students in the high category, these data show that the majority of students inherently understand that responding to violence with violence is not the right solution. The absence of significant gender differences in the “moderate” category shows that about one-fifth of the student population, regardless of gender, may occasionally use harsher methods out of a desire to defend, but do not yet have more effective pro-social intervention skills. This finding is very positive because it indicates that most students already have the moral foundation to reject retaliatory aggression.

**Table 6.** Gender Comparison Analysis for Defender Roles

Category	Male (n=49)	Female (n=55)	Key Differences
Lowest	34.7%	25.5%	Boys tend to be inhibited from intervening to defend victims due to social norms.
Medium	44.9%	61.8%	The majority of female students intend to defend victims or occasionally do so.
Highest	20.4%	12.7%	Boys who are highly pro-social and willing to take risks to defend victims.

The survey results for the role of defender show a more positive distribution overall, but with different patterns between genders (Table 6). Both male and female students show a tendency to defend, with the majority falling into the moderate to high categories. The main difference lies in the distribution: female student data is highly concentrated in the moderate category (61.8%), indicating a large majority who have good intentions and occasionally take action, in line with findings that women are generally more empathetic and are more often nominated as defenders.

On the other hand, data on male students is more polarized, with a significant group in the low category (34.7%) but also a slightly higher percentage in the high category (20.4%). This indicates that although many boys are reluctant to defend possibly due to social norms or fear of social status there is a core group that is very active and consistent in their role as defenders. These findings suggest that interventions for girls can focus on increasing self-efficacy to turn intentions into consistent actions, while interventions for

boys need to address social barriers for the low group and leverage the positive leadership of the high group to set an example for their peers.

**Table 7.** Gender Comparison Analysis for the Role of Outsider

Category	Male (n=49)	Female (n=55)	Key Differences
Lowest	28.6%	20%	Slightly more male students are in the low passive group.
Medium	46.9%	50.9%	The majority of both genders are in the middle, indicating occasional responding or withdrawal.
Highest	24.5%	29.1%	Slightly more female students are in the high passive group.

The survey results for passive bystander roles show that non-involvement or “being a spectator” is the most common response among students, with the majority of males (71.4%) and females (80%) falling into the moderate to high category (Table 7). This clearly illustrates the phenomenon of the silent majority, where most students choose to remain neutral. The gender difference in this case is not particularly sharp, but it does show a trend: females are slightly more likely to consistently take a passive role. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the bystander effect, where students may personally disagree with bullying, but are caught up in diffusion of responsibility or pluralistic ignorance. For you as a counselor, this data is very important because it shows that the biggest challenge is not changing pro-bullying students, but activating and empowering this passive majority of students to shift from being spectators to active defenders.

### Diffusion of Responsibility Bystander Bullying

The bystander effect is a psychological social phenomenon whereby individuals do not help when they are in a group or face a volunteer dilemma (in economic models), hoping that others will help first (Campos-Mercade, 2021). In this case, bystander bullying manifests itself in the roles of bystanders in bullying situations, ranging from defenders, assistants, reinforcers, and outsiders. The primary mechanism underlying and causing the bystander effect is diffusion of responsibility (Raboteg-Šaric, 2019). This significant contribution is also in line with the classic model, which explains that bystander inaction is influenced by three psychological factors, namely diffusion of responsibility, evaluation apprehension, and multiple ignorance (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018). Diffusion of responsibility is a cognitive process whereby an individual feels less personally responsible for acting due to the presence of other people (Raboteg-Šaric, 2019).

Actively diffusing responsibility will weaken, disable, or even bypass an individual's sense of moral responsibility. Individual moral responsibility can be understood as an internal compass that operates based on internalized norms and values, which encourage a person to do the right thing. Morals are closely related to ethical behavior in accordance with the norms in society. Morals in adolescents will develop through a series of processes in social groups related to certain procedures, habits, customs or standards in society (Purwati, Japar, & Qomariyah, 2022). One of the implementations is to improve the quality of education and the value of Pancasila in individuals in their environment from an early age, including in the school environment. The school becomes the second small

community after the family that will be the process of moral formation so that it can avoid maladaptive or unethical behavior (Purwati et al., 2022). Research conducted by Andryawan et al. (2023) states that moral formation that occurs in schools is still not running effectively.

Moral responsibility is a shared responsibility between parents, society and educators. This is because individuals will interact a lot with these three subjects. Moral education will first be taught by parents in a basic way, then continued in the educational environment and must be maintained in the wider community. In the educational environment, education about morals is certainly taught by educators. With moral education, individuals are expected to be able to understand, apply, develop good attitudes, respect differences, act according to values and morals in society (D. A. Lestari, Kholisah, & Supriyanto, 2024). Various challenges will occur and it is not an easy thing to teach morals to students, this is due to the diversity of cultural backgrounds and values adopted by both students and teaching teachers (Rachma, Balqis, & Harahap, 2024).

Bullying is one of the three cardinal sins of education that still occurs frequently. Various efforts have been made to involve all elements of both school residents, communities and parents, government, policy makers (Jr, Muhdar, & Rahman, 2024). The literature review conducted by Jr et al. (2024) states that teachers have an important role in preventing and handling cases of bullying violence through various efforts such as giving warnings, socialization, counseling, motivation. In bullying, there are three roles at once, namely the perpetrator, victim, and bystander. Bystanders have more numbers than perpetrators and victims. One form of moral responsibility that bystanders must have is the ability to empathize with the surrounding environment, including their friendship environment in society and at school (Rizkyanti, Cahyani, Salsabilla, & Aulia, 2021).

The role of bystanders in bullying incidents is so important that it can direct the direction of bullying, whether the bullying will get worse or not happen. Bystander bullying can directly stop the bullying incident by talking and making the perpetrator stop bullying the victim, or it can be by reporting to an adult or homeroom teacher, or it can be a mediating role that will listen and resolve conflicts between the perpetrator and the victim (Zakiyah & Hajar, 2024). Aspects of the bystander effect are feeling a lack of responsibility to help, anxiety about the judgment of others and difficulty understanding the situation, resulting in a tendency not to get involved or indifferent to emergency situations (Rahmadhani & Taufik, 2024). The presence of bystanders can be a positive or negative reinforcement of bullying events depending on whether the bystander's actions help the victim or help the perpetrator to bully (Lesmono & Prasetya, 2020).

Research conducted by Xie shows that the higher the moral sensitivity in students, the more likely they are to help or inhibit the perpetrator rather than showing neglect or indifferent behavior (Najiba et al., 2025). The bystander role is likely to have a domino effect that will continue to occur when it cannot be prevented through increased moral responsibility as a social individual. This effect will result when the victim or bystander becomes the perpetrator in the future by taking revenge for what they experienced before. This also affects the friendship environment at large, because bullying behavior is a behavior that can be learned indirectly in their environment (Halim & Djuwita, 2018).

When a student witnesses bullying within a group, he or she experiences an internal conflict. On the one hand, his or her internal self-regulation process will try to inhibit immoral behavior because it is associated with negative consequences such as guilt and self-condemnation. On the other hand, the presence of others triggers a moral disengagement mechanism, whereby the student can deactivate his or her moral control.

Through diffusion of responsibility, they reduce or eliminate their personal responsibility for the behavior. This is a cognitive strategy that allows a witness to refrain from acting without feeling a negative impact on their self-image, because the moral burden of intervention has been spread to everyone present (Raboteg-Šaric, 2019). An individual's moral responsibility to provide immediate assistance does not depend solely on internal character, but can also be enhanced through practical means such as providing emergency skills training and improving preparedness (Kirschenbaum & Rapaport, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above research, it can be concluded that this study comprehensively investigates the role and moral responsibility of bystanders in bullying incidents among 12-15-year-old MTs students, with a specific focus on gender differences. The most significant finding is that there is no strong statistical correlation between gender and the role taken by a bystander ( $r = 0.036 < 0.195$ ), indicating that the tendency to be a defender, enforcer, assistant to the perpetrator, or even a passive observer (outsider) is not inherently determined by gender. This study highlights that the role of outsider or “silent majority” is the most common phenomenon, where most students choose not to get involved. This phenomenon is explained as a manifestation of diffusion of responsibility, a psychological process in which the presence of others reduces an individual's sense of personal responsibility to act, thereby paralyzing their moral compass to intervene. Thus, this study confirms that the main challenge in preventing bullying is not only dealing with perpetrators, but also activating the moral responsibility of the passive majority of students.

The implications of this research for you as a practitioner and academic in the field of guidance and counseling are significant. Interventions should no longer focus exclusively on perpetrators and victims, but should prioritize empowering passive bystanders to become active defenders (upstanders). Intervention programs can be directed at building individuals' sense of moral responsibility, increasing empathy, and training safe and effective prosocial intervention skills to counteract the effects of diffusion of responsibility. However, this study also has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the generalization of the results is limited because the sampling technique used purposive sampling at one specific school (MTs Negeri 2 Sidoarjo), so the findings may not fully represent the wider population. Second, the statistical power to detect gender differences was very low (observed power = 0.050), indicating that a larger sample size is needed in future studies to confirm the absence of gender effects. Third, the data collected was self-reported, which is prone to social desirability bias, where respondents may answer according to what is considered socially acceptable, rather than their actual behavior. Fourth, cross-sectional research designs only provide a snapshot and cannot establish causal relationships or track behavioral changes over time.

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