

## Barbie Culture: Empowerment or Enslavement of Young Minds?

*This article stems from a lengthy conversation with my two adult daughters about Barbie and its influence on young girls. During our discussion, the underlying concern we shared was whether their younger sister, who recently turned two, should be exposed to Barbie culture or not. I urge parents, especially those with young daughters, to read this article and hold meaningful discussions with them.*

Barbie, the iconic doll introduced in 1959, has recently captured the attention of the media, not just as a beloved toy but also as the subject of a recently released Warner Brothers blockbuster movie. As one of Mattel Inc.'s flagship products, Barbie holds a staggering brand value of \$700 million, but her journey has not been without controversy since her inception. In the early years, Barbie faced legal challenges due to her intriguing origin. She owes her existence to a 1950s German adult doll known as Lilli, which originally appeared as a character in a comic strip for the tabloid Bild. Lilli was portrayed as a flirtatious gold-digger and provocative exhibitionist.

Despite the [controversy surrounding her copied origins](#), Barbie has since become an iconic figure for many generations of children around the world. Her journey from a German adult doll to a cultural phenomenon and now a Hollywood movie character is a testament to the enduring impact she has had on popular culture. The [record-breaking movie, which has surpassed \\$1 billion in ticket sales](#), has rekindled an age-old debate about whether such an innocent-looking, kind-hearted, and easy-going plastic figure can have any negative influence on the minds and values of those who play with it.

Before delving into this debate, this very subject re-states how centrally important and impactful parenting is in a child's life. To illustrate this, children subjected to continual criticism and belittlement by their parents are statistically more inclined to develop diminished self-esteem as compared to those raised by supportive and affirming parents. So, citing instances where children and their self-esteem endured severe public criticism from their parents should not be misconstrued as evidence contradicting the aforementioned observation, nor should it provide parents with justification to disregard their children's sense of self-worth. Put simply, if an individual survives after consuming poison, they fall into the category of exceptions seen as statistical anomalies, which shouldn't serve as a rationale for administering the same poison to others. Furthermore, their survival might come at the cost of significant harm to crucial organs and/or long-term adverse effects later in life. Therefore, parenting is critical and as Muslims, we recognize that while Allah (swt) causes all things to happen we are responsible and accountable for our deeds. This clearly implies that if we fail to offer our children the appropriate environment to develop as strong individuals with unwavering Iman and sound character, we shall be held accountable for our neglect even if they turn out to be exemplary Muslims and vice versa.

Let's connect this by taking a deeper look at what Barbie stands for and in what ways she has been influencing generations of young girls.

### **The traditional doll vs Barbie:**

Girls have been playing with dolls for centuries. The [positive effects of such play](#) are recognized across cultures and religions. It fosters creativity, imagination, and storytelling skills as they create unique narratives and scenarios. It also encourages empathy and social skills as they engage in pretend play, nurturing their dolls and role-playing various life situations. Through doll play, girls can develop a sense of responsibility and caregiving, promoting emotional intelligence and nurturing qualities. Most importantly though, through the caregiving and nurturing activities with their dolls, girls mimic aspects of motherhood. They develop a sense of responsibility and empathy, as they role-play taking care of their "babies."

In stark contrast, it is highly questionable whether the Barbie doll provides any of these benefits and skills. Barbie is not just a doll, it's an iconic figure, a phenomenon. It is by many estimates the most influential toy of the 20th century, which hasn't lost any of that influence well into the 21st century even after 64 years of market presence. Many Western researchers, including the author of "Barbie Culture", Mary Rogers, a Professor of Sociology at the University of West Florida, point towards this very influence as being detrimental for young girls. Let's examine some facets of Barbie's influence and how it has affected generations of young girls.

Barbie's birth was a result of a rebellious mindset and its popularity was propagated by riding the tide of the [second feminist wave of the 1960s](#). Instead of encouraging nurturing and motherhood and perpetuating the idea that a girl's future role would be one of homemaker and mother, this new doll was different and wanted to give unsuspecting girls 'something more'. That something more happened to be:

- Beauty standards
- Role models
- Make-up culture
- Cross-dressing & fashion
- Age-defiance
- Consumerism
- Independence & empowerment

Let's analyze the broader societal impacts of these 'contributions' made by Barbie.

### ***Beauty Standards:***

The main criticism of Barbie remains that it promotes unrealistic beauty standards and perpetuates a narrow and idealized image of femininity. This phenomenon has even gotten names of its own, Barbie Effect or Barbie Syndrome. These refer to the negative impact the exaggerated proportions and focus on appearance have on girls' body image and self-esteem. Medically, this is known as [body dysmorphia](#) - a mental health condition in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance. Multiple research [studies](#) have corroborated the finding that girls exposed to Barbie have lower body esteem and a greater desire for a thinner body shape than girls without such exposure. [In one such study](#), a total of 162 girls, from age 5 to age 8, were exposed to images of either Barbie dolls, normal sized dolls, or no dolls (baseline control) and then completed assessments of body image. Girls exposed to Barbie reported lower body esteem and greater desire for a thinner body shape than girls in the other exposure conditions. To understand this further, it should suffice to know that the original proportions of Barbie give her a body mass index (BMI) so low that she would be [unlikely to menstruate, be anorexic, and would likely have to walk on all fours](#) whereas [this body shape is so far from the average female body that it has a likelihood of less than one in 100,000 women](#) (on another note, Ken's body is more realistic at about one in 50). Expanding on this notion, let's look into the [calculations](#) that shed light on the fact that for a young and healthy adult woman to emulate Barbie's body proportions, she would have to undergo notable changes. Specifically, she would need to grow by an additional 24 inches in height, gain 5 inches in chest measurement, extend her neck length by 3.2 inches, and simultaneously reduce her waist by 6 inches.

### ***Role Models:***

Unfortunately, the effects of Barbie Syndrome aren't limited to just feeling ashamed of your body and avoiding social situations, rather it has become quite common that girls and even women undergo multiple surgeries and [suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia while trying to become like a Barbie](#), which they see as their role model.

Anorexia nervosa is the single deadliest mental health condition. 5% to 20% of people diagnosed with anorexia will ultimately die from its ravaging effects on the body and mind: cardiac complications, organ failure, and even suicide.

Giovanna Riccio in her book of poems, "Plastic's Republic" [provides an analysis of Barbie's impact on female beauty and explains how it has influenced plastic surgery's popularity](#). She terms it the 'human Barbie' phenomenon where plastic-obsessed humans embrace physical and digital cosmetic surgery (through filters and editing) to embody 'dollification'.

[Cindy Jackson](#) is a case in point. She held the Guinness Book of World Records for undergoing the most consecutive cosmetic surgeries for over a decade. At age six Cindy was obsessed with looking like Barbie. It took her over thirty-one surgeries, fourteen years, and thousands of dollars to become the "human Barbie." [Dalia Naeem](#) is another example of someone who underwent 43 cosmetic procedures to look like Barbie. These occurrences are not isolated and can't be dismissed casually. [Cosmetic surgeons in the US express genuine concerns regarding the emergence of a new wave of unrealistic beauty standards, driven by the success of the Barbie movie](#).

The influence of the Barbie figure extends beyond just females and also impacts men. This is evident in [studies that reveal how the choices of models for adult magazines targeted at men continue to uphold the "Barbie Doll" ideal](#), marked by a slender BMI, narrow hips, and a noticeable bust.

### ***Make-up Culture:***

The makeup industry has experienced exponential growth in recent years, with women around the world increasingly investing substantial amounts in cosmetics. This surge is a testament to the transformation of beauty into a thriving business. [Statistics reveal that the global cosmetics market was valued at over \\$500 billion in 2023](#), demonstrating the substantial economic impact of the industry. This heightened expenditure underscores the rising obsession with enhancing appearances through cosmetics. Barbie, with her glamorous image and emphasis on beauty and fashion, has [contributed to shaping beauty ideals for several generations of individuals](#). While it's challenging to attribute the entire makeup industry's growth to Barbie alone, she has played a significant role. The glittery and make-up-laden image of Barbie has undoubtedly influenced young girls' perceptions of beauty and style. Barbie's emphasis on glamor and fashion creates an aspirational image that young girls may strive to emulate. This can translate into an early interest in experimenting with makeup and cosmetics as a means to capture a similar sense of allure. The connection between Barbie's aesthetic and the world of makeup reinforces the idea that enhancing one's appearance through cosmetics is not only acceptable but also a form of self-expression and empowerment. As a result, the allure of recreating Barbie's radiant look may inspire young girls to explore the world of makeup, potentially leading to increased spending on beauty products as they grow older.

### ***Cross-dressing and Fashion:***

Historically, Western societies had separate clothing styles for males and females. Traditional gender-based clothing has often been influenced by various factors, including religious practices, social roles, modesty norms, and the prevailing understanding of gender identity. For example, dresses and skirts were commonly associated with females, while pants and suits were more typical of male attire. It's important to note that just as clothing norms and gender roles have evolved over time so has the understanding of gender itself. However, a form of cross-dressing is recognized as a psychological disorder termed Transvestic Disorder according to The American Psychiatric Association. Given the whole gender identity 'revolution' - where questions like ['What is a woman?'](#) are seen as genuinely requiring an answer - it's not surprising that there has been a corporate greed-driven push for gender-neutral fashion.

If Barbie was one of the main vehicles for this change, the fuel was definitely provided by the fashion industry. Fashion brands and designers are actively working to challenge traditional gender norms in an effort to make societies more open to diverse expressions of gender identity. [As of 2023, the global fashion industry is valued at \\$1.7 trillion.](#)

Similarly, Barbie's iconic high-heeled shoes have the potential to influence girls' and women's footwear choices despite their impractical and harmful nature. A deeper look into the origins of stiletto heels raises questions about whether they could be considered a contemporary parallel to [Chinese foot-binding](#) practices. According to a study conducted by the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society, 50% of women experience daily pain from wearing high-heels. High-heels often put pressure on not only the feet but also the back, spines, knees and toes. Will the [\\$35 billion high-heel industry](#) prioritize women's well-being or will it continue to prioritize profits?

Amidst critiques and competition from smaller brands that championed dolls with more realistic body types, like Lottie and Lammily, Mattel faced a noticeable decline in sales. In response, Mattel initiated "[Project Dawn](#)" in 2016, which marked the launch of the Fashionistas line—a collection of Barbie dolls featuring diverse body shapes (curvy, petite, and tall), abilities, skin tones, eye colors, hairstyles, and clothing options. Paradoxically, (luckily for Mattel) research indicates that young girls aged between three and ten maintained a preference for the original tall and petite Barbie dolls. Regrettably, when presented with the choice, they held an unfavorable view of the "curvy" Barbie variant which has body proportions based on the average female body.

The year 2017 witnessed another significant stride as Mattel introduced ethnically and racially diverse dolls, encompassing a range of nationalities, including the introduction of the first-ever hijab-wearing Barbie doll. However, this strategy wasn't devoid of controversy, as it raised valid concerns that Mattel is treating racial and ethnic distinctions as mere collectibles, commodifying religions and cultures in the process. Furthermore, this endeavor to capture an untapped market share among Muslim girls has sparked concerns, as it promotes a specific style of dress as being Islamic that numerous Muslim scholars deem impermissible due to its contour-revealing design.

### ***Age-defiance:***

Barbie's age-defying image presents a range of concerns for its users. Her timeless appearance can foster unrealistic beauty standards and negatively impact her body image and self-esteem. Moreover, it impedes open conversations about aging and limits the comprehension of life's natural progression. This might hinder empathy and understanding of various life stages, potentially affecting users' emotional growth and well-being. [Female aging, particularly for working women](#), is now an aesthetic pressure felt by many. This pressure can manifest in various ways, such as pursuing cosmetic procedures, adhering to beauty standards, and feeling anxious about the effects of aging on their appearance. Furthermore, aging can also intersect with other societal expectations and roles, such as career progression, family life, and relationships. Women may experience added pressure to balance these aspects while navigating the changes that come with aging. Under these circumstances, it's uncertain how willing women would be to extend birthday wishes to the perpetually 20-year-old-looking Barbie as she approaches her 65th birthday.

### ***Consumerism:***

More than 100 Barbies are sold every minute, according to the manufacturing company and over a billion Barbie dolls have been sold. No wonder that 92% of American girls aged 3 to 12 own an average of 12 Barbies. The prevalence of [Barbie culture has actively contributed](#) to the rampant consumerism and materialism that saturate modern society. The extensive range of dolls, clothes, accessories, high-heels, cosmetics and entertainment (music, movies and games) marketed under the guise of this culture often fosters a fixation on acquiring possessions and equating them with personal value and status. The branding of



[Barbie and all her accessories implicitly communicated the need to have it all](#) — the clothes, the house, the car — to be cool. This trend not only places undue emphasis on superficial appearances but also fuels an insatiable desire for constant acquisition. As young minds become ensnared in the allure of accumulating items to mimic the idealized lifestyles portrayed by Barbie, the profound impact on their values, priorities, and perspectives on fulfillment becomes concerning. The amount of merchandising around the recently released movie is already excessive. Will yet another generation feel the pressure to keep up with Barbie?

In stark contrast to Barbie's tagline, it's clear that plastic is far from fantastic. The annual production and sale of around 60 million Barbie dolls by Mattel have contributed significantly to the generation of excessive plastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions, as highlighted by a [Greenly study conducted in 2022](#). This raises pertinent questions: What purpose does this ongoing plastic consumption serve? Is it justifiable to continue the production of plastic, which has environmental consequences, for the propagation of items that perpetuate female oppression and contribute to societal engineering?

### ***Individualism & Empowerment:***

Another common slogan attached to Barbie culture is that of individualism and empowerment. People want to believe that they are free to do and choose whatever they want. In reality, the confines of law and order are always around us, but it's man-made laws that allow us many short-term pleasures at the expense of a more meaningful life and eternal happiness. If individualism for a girl means objectification, consumerism and frivolity, wouldn't we be better off with collectivism?

Barbie's interpretation of empowerment often remains on the surface, focusing primarily on appearance and consumerism. Despite her portrayal in diverse career roles, these depictions tend to overshadow the more comprehensive dimensions of empowerment, such as fostering meaning, encouraging critical thinking, and creating a positive societal impact.

### **The Barbie Movie:**

After several computer-animated, direct-to-video and streaming television films, Barbie's first big-budget, live-action movie was released in cinemas in July 2023. For Barbie-maker Mattel, there is much riding on the movie — [primarily reviving sales of Barbie dolls and accessories](#).

The powerful cultural influence of Barbie is evident from its record-breaking revenues while a contemporaneously released film centered around the esteemed nuclear scientist Oppenheimer, struggles for success. Ironically, the allure of beauty and glamor often eclipse subjects of intellectual depth. The popularity divide represents a potential aspect of the intellectual decadence prevalent among the masses, where a society's fixation on superficial aesthetics overshadows appreciation for the intellectual pursuits that shape our world. Paradoxically, a movie themed on an all-time favorite children's toy is PG-13.

### **Islamic Perspective:**

Having discussed Barbie's contribution to society from various perspectives, and having established from a fairly ideologically neutral point of view the harm and dangers that she harbors, it is now time to seek divine guidance on the matter. We as Muslims believe that Allah (swt) has guided us in all aspects of life and parenting is of course not an exception. As parents, we are commanded, ﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قُوا أَنفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ﴾ **“O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is people and stones...”** [TMQ Surah At-Tahrim: 6].

So, parenting is a critical matter, which means we should be at least as careful in allowing our children to play with something as we would be when it comes to what they eat. We would at no cost let them ingest poison, nor would we be comfortable with them

consuming junk food unchecked. Then how can we put our daughters in a situation which is more than likely going to affect their thoughts, values, behaviors, health and connection to Islam? Why would a parent permit their young daughters to engage with and be shaped by a provocatively attired, excessively sexualized, adult-like doll that features exaggerated curves and proportions acknowledged for their unrealistic and provocative nature? Which parent would want their daughters to adopt such a doll as their role model instead of the Mothers of the Believers (ra), the daughters of the Prophet (saw), the wives of the Prophets (as) and the female companions (sahabiyaat) (ra) of the Prophet Muhammad (saw)? Can there be a parent so intellectually bankrupt that they would prefer their daughters to focus on and be valued for their female bodily characteristics instead of the thoughts they carry, the intentions they have and the purpose in life they follow? When we know that as parents one of the biggest potential struggles we can have with our daughters entering adolescence is with regards to the proper Islamic dress code, how can we encourage any toy or content which promotes promiscuity? Don't we know that women are not allowed to beautify themselves while in public, how can we then bring home a figure which would be unrecognizable without all the make-up and glittery fashion accessories? Haven't we heard of the ayaat and ahadith on *Tabarruj* that we keep buying high-heels for their dolls only to later have difficulty in telling them off from it? Haven't we seen the hadith forbidding cross-dressing that we celebrate all the different male attires Barbie wears? Don't we know that the Prophet (saw) has praised the one who ages while on Islam and also how much he honored the elderly, how can we then idealize remaining youthful forever? Are we unaware of the rulings of gender segregation in general that we don't mind Barbie having a boyfriend? Aren't we like travelers in this world and this world is like a prison for us, so how can we appreciate this obsession with hoarding objects and apparel? Have we forgotten the importance of society that we want our daughters to strive for individualism and empower them to shun their primary role as a mother and homemaker for roles which Allah has not obliged for her?

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding Barbie culture highlights both its influence and potential consequences on young minds. The iconic doll has left an indelible mark on society and its young minds. The importance of mindful parenting hasn't been more significant ever before due to the pervasive Western cultural values that are polluting our young minds. Barbie has proven to be one such pollutant, which can easily be ignored by parents as being just another toy. However, the evidence against this view is compelling and when viewed from the Islamic perspective, it becomes even clearer how important it is to save our progeny from such evil influences. What is presented as empowerment is actually enslavement. Enslavement of corporate-defined beauty standards and of our own desires (*hawā*) fanned by such shallow standards. This is of course not limited to Barbie, but even other such action figures and cartoons should be approved by parents only with utmost care and consideration. It should suffice to state that by some estimates, there were [259 LGBTQ cartoon characters on TV as of 2021](#), of which [17 are from Disney](#).

For those who still idealize Barbie, here is some good news: Achieving Barbie-influenced feminine allure just requires the precise blend of self-doubt, bulimia, and surgery!

For those who idealize Islam, here is some good news. Allah (swt) never contradicts His promise. Allah (swt) said, ﴿وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ سَنُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرَى مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا ۗ﴾ **“But as for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We will admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide forever. [It is] the promise of Allah, [which is] truth, and who is more truthful than Allah in statement.”** [TMQ Surah An-Nisa:122].

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