



Barbie the Movie: Hot Pink Feminism

**Bezen Balamir Coşkun
Zeynepnaz Coşkun**

For the last couple of weeks, Greta Gerwig's pink-themed movie on the Mattel toy Barbie has given a kiss of life to the comatose movie sector in Hollywood.

Barbie's writer & director Greta Gerwig has already made a name for herself as the darling of indie (independent) cinema. Throughout her career the focus of her films has been the topics of girlhood, womanhood and coming of age. She made a debut with films such as [Ladybird](#), [Frances Ha](#) and [Little Women](#). All these movies helped her to pave the way for her to give life to the iconic Mattel toy, Barbie.

In the opening scene that pays homage to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey the narrator tells us that girls could only play with baby dolls and pretend to be mothers in their plays until Barbie. By introducing the idea of a doll who can be a woman's model, the children enter a new phase of their evolution, jumping directly into a more mature dimension. Since its creation by Mattel, Barbie has become more than just a perfect image of everything for girls. Before Barbie, little girls were playing with dolls only as an imitation game, a way to have a feeling of how their mothers live. After Barbie, girls had the chance to interact with more advanced models of women in society. She became a doctor, a scientist, a teacher. As the narrator says: "Barbie is all these women. And all these women are Barbie."

Following this philosophy, Gerwig creates an alternative feminist reality: Barbieland, a hot pink picture-perfect place, where women hold all positions of power and live in love and harmony. At Barbieland men are not the center of women's lives. They are simply there as Kens. The Kens in Barbieland do not really serve much purpose except for being there, hanging out on the beach and being friends or boyfriends of Barbies. As the tagline of the movie pointed out she was everything, and he was just Ken!

Behind all the sparkly exterior and vibrant pink colour that caused a global pink paint shortage, Barbie is a coming-of-age story. The main plot of the movie finds the stereotypical Barbie played by Margot Robbie having an existential crisis in which she starts questioning life and death among other things something which is unheard of in Barbieland where everyone has a perfect day every day.

At some point she experiences some physical changes including. “flatfeet”. She even realizes that she has cellulites. As Barbie falls deeper and deeper into anxious thoughts, she thinks that she is malfunctioning and goes to Weird Barbie for help. This particular Barbie is called as Weird Barbie because her hair was chopped and her face was painted by the girl who played with her. Weird Barbie tells Barbie that all of the Barbies in Barbieland are connected to the child who plays with them. To fix the problem she must travel to the real world and find the girl who plays with her. Only then she can understand what’s wrong with her. The main Ken played by Ryan Gosling is hopelessly in love with the stereotypical Barbie. Thus, he decides to follow her into the real world to help.

Once Barbie enters the real world, she is bombarded with the reality that women do not hold the positions of power. They are not respected, rather objectified. She is shocked to find out that Barbies have not helped turn the world into a feminist utopia as the Narrator told us at the beginning of the movie. Whilst Barbie is absolutely distraught, Ken is quite enjoying himself because he realizes that he can just exist as a man and people respect him. He learns about toxic masculinity and patriarchy. In his own naive way, he thinks that the patriarchy is so fun, men riding horses and drinking beer. Ken leaves Barbie alone and returns to Barbieland to tell other Kens about patriarchy!

After overcoming the shock of the real world, Barbie starts looking for her human-owner. The disappointment is never ending for Barbie because once she finds Sasha, she comes to realize that Sasha does not like her at all. Sasha tells her that all she did was give her unrealistic physical expectations, and making women feel bad about themselves.

In the meantime, the all-male executive board at the Mattel HQ realizes that a Barbie has come into the real world and that they must get her back to Barbieland before people notice. After a long chase Sasha and her mother Gloria who works at Mattel help Barbie escape from the real world and go back to Barbieland. However, upon returning Barbie is shocked to see that Ken has overthrown the Barbies and implemented the patriarchy in Barbieland. Now all Barbies serve Kens, including the Nobel Prize winning Barbie and the President Barbie. Her Barbie dream house has been taken away by Ken. Sasha, Gloria and Barbie give a visit to Weird Barbie for help. Weird Barbie explains that all the Barbies have been brainwashed by the patriarchal ideas and they do not remember the things they have accomplished.

After everything she experiences Barbie breaks down and decides to give up. She feels she’s not enough, not pretty enough, not strong enough, not intelligent enough. In one of the most emotional scenes of the movie Sasha’s mother Gloria gives her legendary monologue on how it’s impossible to be a woman who can achieve the expectations set by society:

“It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong... You have to answer for men's bad behaviour, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood...But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful...And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.”

This speech frees the Barbies in the room from their trance. So they hatch a plan to free all the Barbies and win back Barbieland. At the end of the movie Barbie realizes that she can no longer remain in Barbieland, she wants to become a real woman. She wants to feel all the joy and pain that comes with being a woman.

Greta Gerwig has been an exceptional filmmaker; however Barbie is by far her biggest movie. The movie is predicted to earn over 1 billion USD internationally and has already become a cultural phenomenon. People wore their pink outfits and flocked to the cinemas. But what makes this film so relatable to all the woman around the world?

The answer is quite simple. At the end of the day we are all Barbie as woman. As Gerwig said, we are so tired of watching ourselves and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. As little girls we do not know about the patriarchy, we do not know about societal expectations. We can be everything in our imagination. We play with boys and girls not even thinking about gender. We see each other simply as humans, as friends. Then, as we grow up we are forced to leave our Barbielands. We become aware that we are in fact not equals. Boys realize that they are men and that we are just girls. It becomes a race for us to prove our worth that we as women are just as strong, as capable as men. Ruth Handler, the creator of Barbie, made room for herself and Barbie in the male world, showing that girls can do and be whatever they want. There comes a time in every woman's coming of age where we feel powerless, and we just want to give up. But just like Barbie, we find company in other women and we lift each other up. We might not overthrow the patriarchy as fast as the Barbies did in Barbieland, but we know that we have to carry on our struggle just like all the women did before us.

Associate Prof. Dr. Bezen Balamir-Coşkun is an international relations scholar who specializes in foreign policy and security. She received her Ph.D. degree from Loughborough University (UK). She has worked in several higher education institutions and research centers both in Turkey and abroad. Since 2016, she has coordinated the Izmir Policy Center, which is a consultancy agency. Most recently she is an Adjunct Professor at TED University in Ankara, Turkey. She has published articles, book chapters, and policy briefs on her area of expertise. She is a member of Women in Foreign Policy initiative.

Zeynepnaz Coşkun is a feminist and civil rights activist. She has a BS degree in applied psychology and working as a child development specialist in a multi-lingual pre-school at Munich. Zeynepnaz loves reading feminist literature and watching indie movies.