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Living Dolls

The Return of Sexism

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virago

Dolls

I didn't expect we would end up here, I thought to myself a few years ago during a visit to a toy shop in London. I had moved up through the shop on the escalator, from the multi-coloured bustle of the ground floor, stuffed full of the warm tints and round shapes of soft toys, and into the dream world of the third floor. Here, it was as though someone had jammed rose-coloured spectacles over my eyes, and yet the effect was nauseating rather than beautifying. Everything was pink, from the sugared-almond pink of Barbie, to the strawberry tint of Disney's Sleeping Beauty, to the milky pink of Baby Annabell, to the rose pink of Hello Kitty. There was a pink nail bar where little girls could paint their nails, a pink 'boutique stand' with earrings and necklaces, and dolls in pink boxes that came with pink 'manicure bedrooms' and pink 'salon spaces'.

Many feminists in the past argued that girls and boys should be encouraged to play across the boundaries laid down by their sex, and that there was no reason for girls to be confined to this pastel sphere. But not only does this division between the pink

girls' world and the blue boys' world still exist, it is becoming more exaggerated than ever in this generation.

It often seems now that the dolls are escaping from the toy shop and taking over girls' lives. Not only are little girls expected to play with dolls, they are expected to model themselves on their favourite playthings. The glittering pink aesthetic now extends to almost every aspect of a girl's life. The all-encompassing nature of modern marketing techniques means that it is now possible for a little girl to sit at home watching her *Sleeping Beauty* DVD, playing with a Sleeping Beauty doll complete with the same costume, while dressed herself in a shiny replica of Sleeping Beauty's dress. She can then trip off to school with Barbies or Bratz on everything from her knickers to her hair clips to her schoolbag, and come home to look at her reflection in the mirror of a Disney Princess dressing table. The brilliant marketing strategies of these brands are managing to fuse the doll and the real girl in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

This strange melding of the doll and the real girl can continue way beyond childhood. Living a doll's life seems to have become an aspiration for many young women, as they leave childhood behind only to embark on a project of grooming, dieting and shopping that aims to achieve the bleached, waxed, tinted look of a Bratz or Barbie doll. The characters they watch in romantic comedies are women who make such exaggerated femininity seem aspirational, and the celebrities they read about in fashion and gossip magazines are often women who are well known to have chosen extreme regimes, from punishing diets to plastic surgery, to achieve an airbrushed perfection.

The fusion of the woman and the doll at times becomes almost surreal. When the singers in Girls Aloud launched Barbie doll versions of themselves in 2005, you could look – to paraphrase George Orwell – from doll to girl and girl to doll, and it was almost impossible to see which was which. Both real and

plastic women were so eerily perfect in their painted skin, nylon-glossy hair and hard bodies. When two young twins entered the reality television show *Big Brother* in the UK in 2007, dressed in identical pink miniskirts and bleached hair, they said Barbie was the inspiration for their lives. The actress and singer Hilary Duff has said, 'When I was younger, I was so inspired by Barbie. She has been a role model for my friends and me. I love her style and her spirit!'¹ Even when the link between women and dolls isn't made so explicit, many of the so-called role models that strut under the contemporary limelight, from Paris Hilton to Victoria Beckham, take the plastic look so far that they seem to have been created by Mattel.

For more than 200 years, feminists have been criticising the way that artificial images of feminine beauty are held up as the ideal to which women should aspire. From Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949, to Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in 1970, to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* in 1991, brilliant and angry women have demanded a change in these ideals. Yet far from fading away, they have become narrower and more powerful than ever. What's more, throughout much of our society, the image of female perfection to which women are encouraged to aspire has become more and more defined by sexual allure. Of course wanting to be sexually attractive has always and will always be a natural desire for both men and women, but in this generation a certain view of female sexuality has become celebrated throughout advertisements, music, television programmes, films and magazines. This image of female sexuality has become more than ever defined by the terms of the sex industry.

Throughout our society, female sexuality now tends to be seen in a very narrow light, often defined by slender exhibitionists with large breasts gyrating around poles in their underwear. The narrowing of what it means to be sexy arises from the way that

the sex industry has become more generally acceptable. The movement of the sex industry from the margins to the mainstream of our society can be seen in many places – from the unexpected resurgence of glamour modelling, which means that many young women have been encouraged to believe that stripping to their knickers for lads' magazines is their best possible route to success; to the sudden growth of lap-dancing clubs in town centres; to a new fashion for the style of dancing associated with those clubs, pole-dancing; to the popularity of memoirs of prostitution that suggest selling sex is a great way for a woman to earn her living; and, above all, to the much greater presence of pornography in the lives of many young people, driven by the internet. This latter development has affected magazine and newspaper publishing, advertising, television and music, many areas of which have begun to share the aesthetic values of soft pornography. The messages and values of this revitalised sex industry have reached deep into the hearts of many young men and women.

This association of femininity and sexiness starts early: while it's hardly new for women to want to be sexy, it's new that even childhood playthings should look so sexy. Although feminists in the 1970s deplored Barbie's tiny waist, large breasts and perfect features, she could be marketed to girls as a pilot, a doctor or an astronaut, with accessories to match her roles. Bratz dolls, who recently toppled Barbie from her throne as the best-selling fashion doll, were created with a wardrobe for clubbing and shopping, dressed in fishnet and feathers, crop tops and miniskirts, with heavily painted faces that look as if they have been created by Jordan's make-up artist.²

When you wander into a toy shop and find this new, altogether more slutty and sultry ideal pouting up at you from a thousand figurines, you realise that there has been a genuine change in the culture aimed at young girls. While girls have always been encouraged to see self-decoration as a central part of their lives, today they are also exposed to a deluge of mes-

sages, even at an early age, about the importance of becoming sexually attractive. These dolls are just a fragment of a much wider culture in which young women are encouraged to see their sexual allure as their primary passport to success.

This highly sexualised culture is often positively celebrated as a sign of women's liberation and empowerment. It was indeed an aim of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s that women should be released from conventional morality around sex, which had confined them to idealised chastity on the one hand or contemptible promiscuity on the other. The fact that women can now be sexually active and experienced without being condemned is a direct result of second-wave feminism. And this is clearly something to be celebrated. But it is strange that all aspects of the current hypersexual culture are often now seen as proof of women's growing freedom and power. So the renaissance of glamour modelling is seen by many who participate in the industry as a marker not of persistent sexism, but of women's new confidence. For instance, as one ex-editor of a lads' magazine said to me, 'It's the women who are driving this. It's all changed. . . . I think that to people of my age, it's bizarre to see young women being so confident sexually at such an early age.' Similarly, the fashion for pole-dancing classes is talked about as if it were liberating for women. The website for Pole Dancing Hen Weekends states that, 'Pole dancing classes are all about freeing yourself from the restrictions imposed on you in your everyday life and empowering yourself.'³ Even occupations such as lap dancing and prostitution are often now surrounded by this quasi-feminist rhetoric. One young lap dancer quoted in an interview in *The Times* in 2008 said, 'I have never had a job where I felt so empowered,'⁴ and the actor Billie Piper, who starred in a television adaptation of the memoir by 'Belle de Jour', a prostitute working in London, said in an interview, 'When I am playing Belle I have to play a sexually liberated, empowered young prostitute.'⁵

This means that rather than being seen as negative for women, the mainstreaming of the sex industry is now often presented as a culmination of the freedoms that feminists have sought. As one female writer who was looking at the mainstream appeal of pornography put it in an article in the *Guardian*: 'Instead of desperately longing for the right to be seen as human beings, today's girls are playing with the old-fashioned notion of being seen as sex objects. This is not terrible news. In fact, to me, this is the ultimate feminist ideal.'⁶

This equation of empowerment and liberation with sexual objectification is now seen everywhere, and is having a real effect on the ambitions of young women. When I interviewed women who have worked in the sex industry for this book, I was struck to find that some of them had been seduced by the idea that this work could enhance their sense of individual power. Ellie is an articulate, well-educated woman who had gone to private school and a good university, and had been brought up to believe she could do anything in any profession – law, medicine, politics. Instead, she had decided she wanted to be an actor, but when jobs were hard to find and she found herself financially desperate, she took a sideways step in her twenties by going to work in a lap-dancing club in London. She didn't feel, at first, that it would be very difficult. She told me she had picked up messages from our culture that lap dancing was pretty straightforward and even empowering for the women who do it. 'People say that, don't they,' she said to me thoughtfully when we met. 'There's this myth that women are expressing their sexuality freely in this way, and that as they can make lots of money out of it, it gives them power over the men who are paying.'

This was not what she found herself, however. She was shocked to discover quite how demeaning and dehumanising she found the work. In the situation of the club, women became more like dolls than people. 'There's something about the club – the lights, the make-up, the clothes you wear, those huge plat-

form heels, the way that so many women have fake boobs,' she said. 'You look like cartoons. You give yourself a fake girly name, like a doll. You're encouraged to look like dolls. No wonder the men don't see you as people.'

Although the word empowerment is so often attached to this culture, it is a strange distortion of what the term once meant to feminists. When we talked about empowerment in the past, it was not a young woman in a thong gyrating around a pole that would spring to mind, but the attempts by women to gain real political and economic equality. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there was a real optimism that this kind of power genuinely could be within the grasp of more women than ever before, and that women would then be free to attain their true potential without being held back by the weight of inequality.

It may seem strange to say so after the political disillusion of the last decade, but the early years of the Blair administration in the UK and the early years of the Clinton administration in the US were hailed in many places as offering new hope for women who wanted to enter the corridors of power. Naomi Wolf, the American feminist, wrote in 1993: 'In 1992 record numbers of women ran for office in the US . . . The genderquake rattled and reoriented the presidential elections.'⁷ And I wrote in the *Observer* just before the 1997 General Election in the UK: 'If we see a six per cent swing to Labour, the number of women MPs should double . . . It's not equality yet, but don't underestimate what it will mean. We'll see the gentleman's club begin to crumble, we'll begin to see a political culture that responds to women's priorities . . . This impending revolution in women's power is one issue that we shouldn't be cynical about.'⁸

This shift towards greater equality in politics meant that feminist arguments that had long been regarded as marginal could be heard in many political debates. During the first five years of the New Labour government, we heard from policy makers about the need to prosecute crimes against women, such as

domestic violence and rape, more effectively. We also heard a great deal about the need to change the working world. New Labour brought in the minimum wage, which affected women far more than men, and also expanded parental leave rights, childcare and flexible working. During these early years the Labour government doubled maternity pay, introduced paid paternity leave, introduced free part-time nursery places for three- and four-year-olds, and its ministers discussed how they could push on a workplace revolution.⁹ There was an optimism not just about changes in women's lives, but about changes in men's lives too. When Tony Blair took a couple of weeks off work when his fourth child was born in 2000, his move was welcomed, since: 'When one of the world's most powerful men sets this kind of example, the impact on the workplace and parental leave will be immense.'¹⁰

With this kind of debate happening all around us, it was easy for me to argue in my earlier book, *The New Feminism*, which was published at the end of the 1990s, that even if the women's movement may have quietened down, feminism had become part of the very air we breathed. It was also easy for me to argue, and I was glad to be able to do so, that feminists could now concentrate on achieving political and social and financial equality. In the past, feminist arguments had often centred on private lives: how women made love, how they dressed, whom they desired. I felt that the time for this had passed. I believed that we only had to put in place the conditions for equality for the remnants of old-fashioned sexism in our culture to wither away.

I am ready to admit that I was entirely wrong. While many women relaxed and believed that most arguments around equality had been won, and that there were no significant barriers to further progress, the dolls were on the march again. The rise of a hypersexual culture is not proof that we have reached full equality; rather, it has reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances of power in our society. Without thoroughgoing eco-

conomic and political change, what we see when we look around us is not the equality we once sought; it is a stalled revolution.

Men and women may still be trying to inch towards greater equality at home as well as at work, but the pressure for change and the sense of optimism has gone. The relentless masculinity of British politics is a marker of wider failure in the attempts to create equality between the sexes. While the 1997 election doubled the number of women in Parliament, from 60 to 120 out of 646, the pace of change then slowed to a standstill. The next two elections increased the number of women in Parliament by only eight, and in the Scottish Parliament the proportion of women actually dropped, from 40 per cent in 2003 to 35 per cent in 2009.¹¹ New Labour gradually began to be associated with a sense of broken promises for women in politics. Many female ministers resigned during the summer of 2009, and one launched a bitter attack on the inability of the prime minister to support women in government, saying that she had been used merely as ‘female window-dressing’.¹²

Just as women have not moved forwards as far as was once hoped into the corridors of power, men have not taken the steps into the home that might once have been expected. Although the rhetoric is often spoken about flexible working and shared parental responsibility, in 2009 men were still only entitled to two weeks’ paternity leave at £123 per week. Plans to equalise rights to parental leave by introducing a scheme whereby men and women could share twelve months’ leave between them were shelved by the government in response to ‘tough economic times’.¹³ Given the discrepancy between women’s entitlement to spend time at home and men’s lack of similar rights, it is hardly surprising that women are still doing the vast majority of domestic work. Even when women work full-time, according to one study, they do twenty-three hours of domestic work a week, as opposed to men’s eight hours, while women who work part-time do thirty-three hours of domestic work per week. The authors of

that report commented that the domestic workload that still fell on their shoulders was what prevented many women from working the long hours required for higher-paid jobs.¹⁴

The reality is that although girls still do as well as boys at every level of education, the workplace has not seen the changes that were once expected. While men and women with young children have the right to request flexible working, for women the decision not to work full-time still carries a huge penalty. The hourly pay gap for women working full-time is around 17 per cent, but it is around 35 per cent for women working part-time – in other words, an average woman who works part-time earns only two-thirds of the money that the average full-time male worker would earn each hour.¹⁵ And what is most worrying is that there is evidence that progress on the pay gap has stalled; from 2007 to 2008 it actually widened.¹⁶ For women in senior management, equality may be more elusive than ever, as research carried out in 2007 showed: ‘The Price Waterhouse Coopers research found that among FTSE 350 companies in 2002 almost 40% of senior management posts were occupied by women. When that research was repeated for 2007, the number of senior management posts held by women had fallen to just 22%.’¹⁷ One female manager, who was interviewed about why so many of her peers had left, tried to put her finger on the problem. While people may understand the need for equality issues on intellectual grounds, ‘It’s what they get in their hearts that matters.’

What do we get in our hearts? It is time to make the links between the cultural changes we have seen over the last ten years and this stalled revolution. Although opportunities for women are still far wider than they were a generation ago, we are now seeing a resurgence of old sexism in new guises. Far from giving full scope to women’s freedom and potential, the new hypersexual culture redefines female success through a narrow framework of sexual allure.

What's more, alongside the links that are made between this kind of exaggerated sexual allure and empowerment, we have recently seen a surprising resurgence of the idea that traditional femininity is biologically rather than socially constructed. A new interest in biological determinism now runs throughout our society. Indeed, the association between little girls and everything that is pink and glittery is being explained in many places not as a cultural phenomenon, which could therefore be challenged, but as an inescapable result of biology, which is assumed to be resistant to change. Some neuroscientists recently carried out an experiment which, they claimed, suggested that girls are biologically predisposed to prefer pink. This experiment consisted of presenting men and women with differently coloured pairs of rectangles and asking them to pick out their favourites. The researchers found that women liked reddish hues more than men did, and concluded by suggesting that this difference in colour preference could be explained by biological differences between men and women, which would have been created by their different occupations way, way back in the past. Since women, they speculated, would have been more likely to be gathering ripe red fruit than hunting big game under blue skies many millennia ago, women had evolved to respond more enthusiastically to pink than men would.¹⁸

This suggestion was picked up uncritically by much of the national press. 'Boys like blue, girls like pink, it's in our genes,' was the *Independent* newspaper's headline on their report.¹⁹ 'Pink for a girl and blue for a boy – and it's all down to evolution', was the headline in the *Guardian*.²⁰ The writer in the *Guardian* linked the study immediately to the accessories of modern childhood: 'The theory is encouraging for Barbie enthusiasts, who have seen the doll attacked for her "anti-feminist" pink clothes and decor.' Yet, as a couple of lone commentators pointed out, there was nothing in the study that could prove that this preference for pink was a difference that had been

hardwired into women's brains aeons ago, rather than one that is simply being encouraged by our current culture.

This is just one study, but its suggestions and its reception typify much contemporary research on this subject. There has been a great flurry of research into sex differences over recent years, in disciplines from neuroscience to linguistics to psychology. Some of this work has looked into the structure and activity of male and female brains, some has looked into the influence of differing levels of hormones, some has looked into differences in the intellectual aptitudes and achievements of men and women, some has looked into their abilities to empathise and nurture. Conclusions have been mixed, but the way that such research is reported in the media and by popular writers constantly reinforces the idea that the differences we see between male and female behaviour must be down to biology.

These beliefs have now penetrated much of the culture that surrounds our children. The educational establishment often reproduces them uncritically, so that, for instance, the website of the Girls' Schools Association states that 'Research in the last 10 years or so on brain development suggests that gender differences are as much to do with the chemistry and structure of the brain as the way in which girls and boys are raised. The tendencies of girls to be more contemplative, collaborative, intuitive and verbal, and boys to be more physically active, aggressive, and independent in their learning style seems to stem from brain function and development.'²¹ And while teachers and parents are picking up these ideas, toy companies reinforce them with alacrity. As a spokesperson for Disney said recently, when explaining the recent success of the Disney Princess brand, which encompasses dolls, dressing-up clothes and accessories: 'We believe it is an innate desire in the vast majority of young girls to play out the fantasy of being a princess. They like to dress up, they like to role-play. It's just a genetic desire to like pink, to like the castle, to turn their dads into the prince.'²²

This reliance on 'the chemistry and structure of the brain' and the 'genetic desire' as the explanation for stereotypically feminine behaviour is not only being used to explain how little girls play and learn, it is also being used to explain away the inequalities we see in adult life. Writers such as Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at Cambridge University, have written extensively on how they believe that the differences we see between the sexes in adult life are attributable as much to biology as they are to social factors. In his book *The Essential Difference*, Simon Baron-Cohen argues that having a 'female brain' or a 'male brain' will not only influence the way you behave as a child, but will also influence your choice of occupations as an adult. He starts with anecdotes about a typical girl child and a typical boy child, and tells us that the typical girl is 'into dolls and small toy animals. She would spend hours dressing and undressing Barbie dolls.'²³ He then goes further, and suggests that on average grown-up females also have superior social talents to males, and that this is reflected in the occupations they will naturally choose. 'People with the female brain make the most wonderful counsellors, primary-school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff . . . People with the male brain make the most wonderful scientists, engineers, mechanics, technicians, musicians, architects, electricians, plumbers, taxonomists, catalogists, bankers, toolmakers, programmers or even lawyers.'²⁴

It's striking that the occupations judged suitable for the female brain, by Simon Baron-Cohen and other followers of biological explanations for gender differences, would have been seen as women's work by old-fashioned chauvinism as much as by fresh research. Indeed, if you look closely at the evidence for this kind of biological determinism, it is hard to escape the conclusion that its popularity often relies as much on bad old stereotypes as on good new science. There is science on either side of this debate,

yet it is often the case that the media will rush to embrace only one side. This means that biological determinism is often assumed to be the new consensus throughout the academy. In fact, many scientists are now raising their voices to dissent from the use of biological explanations for the continuing gender divisions in society. If this dissent were more widely heard, we might be inclined to challenge not only those apparently trivial differences between boys' and girls' toys, but also the continuing existence of serious inequality in men's and women's adult lives.

I think it is time to challenge the exaggerated femininity that is being encouraged among women in this generation, both by questioning the resurgence of the biological determinism which tells us that genes and hormones inexorably drive us towards traditional sex roles, and by questioning the claustrophobic culture that teaches many young women that it is only through exploiting their sexual allure that they can become powerful. Of course, it has to be a woman's own choice if she makes a personal decision to buy into any aspect of what might be seen as stereotypically feminine behaviour, from baking to pole-dancing, from high heels to domestic work. I am just as sure as I ever was that we do not need to subscribe to some dour and politically correct version of feminism in order to move towards greater equality. But we should be looking for true choice, in a society characterised by freedom and equality. Instead, right now a rhetoric of choice is masking very real pressures on this generation of women. We are currently living in a world where those aspects of feminine behaviour that could be freely chosen are often turning into a cage for young women.

In examining these aspects of women's experiences, I am well aware there are places this book does not go. I have spent much of the last few years talking to women who come from places outside mainstream Western feminist debate. I have travelled to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran to find out how women view their rights in different parts of the world, and in the UK I

have been working alongside women who have fled here for refuge from other countries. I have learned, and I am still learning, a great deal from these individuals about the importance of working across cultures. This book does not attempt to cover such ground; here I stay not only within Western culture, but also primarily within British, heterosexual experience. In doing so, I am not suggesting that other experiences are not just as valid and vital.

Above all, this is no time to succumb to inertia or hopelessness. Feminists in the West have already created a peaceful revolution, opening many doors for women that were closed to them before, expanding opportunities and insisting on women's rights to education, work and reproductive choice. We have come so far already. For our daughters, the escalator doesn't have to stop on the dolls' floor.