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I Am Not Barbie, and I Do Not Need a Ken

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I Am Not Barbie, and I Do Not Need a Ken

Throughout history, women have faced unfairness and gender inequality. Women are stereotyped and mistreated every day. Some examples are, women are paid less than men, and women have to cover their bodies in public (if not, it is their fault if something dangerous happens to them). Home is supposed to be a safe haven for women, but what about if the unfairness happens at home by the people we love the most? Mistreatment can come from our parents. As a young woman who was treated differently than my brother, I talk about my experiences and how they have shaped my life. I strive to help others understand and be more aware of the inequalities between siblings and parents.

Introduction

It was upsetting living in a household where men were treated different than women. Growing up, my little brother had more privileges than I. He could be disobedient without punishment. I used to question my mother and ask her why my little brother had more privilege than I did even though I was older. Her response was always, "Because he is a boy." I am sharing this personal story about how my life was shaped by this mistreatment.

It wasn't until I went to college that I learned about feminism. I realized that I am a feminist and that I have been one since I was a child. It felt good to know that there is a word and body of knowledge for what I had felt in my heart for so many years. It empowered me!

In college, I finally met a group of women who felt the same way and were as strong

minded as me. However, it also saddens me that it took me so long to realize that I was a feminist and that it is not normal or acceptable for women to be treated differently than men. I did not learn this in grammar school, at church, and certainly not at home. Even though my mother and stepfather tried to program me to think that men have more privileges than women, I never believed it. Something inside me just could not accept their views.

I was interested to learn and read more about this topic to find out if studies have been made to argue my point to let parents know that gender differences between siblings do have consequences and negative impacts on children. Two separate reviews of the book *Pink Brain, Blue Brain* by Lise Eliot (2009) discuss Eliot's proposal that it is how parents perceive their babies that creates the gender differences many assume are inborn. Eliot cites studies showing "adults perceive baby boys and girls differently, seeing identical behavior through a gender-tinted lens" (Begley, 2009, para. 2). Eliot's theory is rooted in very tiny differences present in infancy which are magnified by parental treatment, explains J. A. North in the review, "Do Parents Create Gender Differences?". North hopes that Eliot's theory will help parents

recognize their unconscious prejudices.

Another interesting article is "Family Favorite? Parents and Siblings See Imbalances in Parents' Attention Differently" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007), which is about how parents treat their children differently and how siblings and parents often have very different ideas about what is happening and why. This research explains a study that was conducted with 74 two-parent, middle-class families with one child between the ages of 11 and 13 and a teen sibling who is two to four years older. Both parents and siblings were interviewed individually about family interactions. The outcome of this research is that it is important for families to talk about parent-child interaction and for moms and dads to listen to what their kids are telling them about how parental actions are affecting them. To me, this is very important because as a woman who experienced parental conflict, I felt that my mother did not listen to me which caused me to rebel against her and view her negatively.

Susan D. Witt (1997), in "Parental Influence on Children's Socialization to Gender Roles" explains that children learn at an early age how to be a boy or a girl in our society. They first learn from their parents. I learned from my

mother what it meant to be a girl and what rules and behaviors I had to subscribe to. Witt also describes how, as a child growing and developing, “the gender stereotypes they are exposed to at home are reinforced by other elements in their environment and thus perpetuated throughout childhood and on into adolescence” (p. 253).

Witt explains how studies have been done that prove parent-child relationships have effects on development that last well into adulthood. Because of these long-lasting effects, the parent-child relationships are one of the most important developmental factors for a child. Because of my mom’s views, our relationship suffered tremendously and it lasted until adulthood. My mom finally realized that I was my own person and I was going to make my own choices no matter what she wanted. I spent a long time away from my mother. It was during that time that I finally realized I have control over my life and she cannot dictate my decisions.

Some of my Story...

I had a great childhood. Since I enjoyed playing with Barbie dolls, my mother made sure I had all the Barbie accessories to keep me occupied. One day, my mother found Barbie and Ken

naked under my bed. She asked me, “What is this?” and I replied, “They are a couple and they are in love.” My mother, with a concerned look on her face said, “Barbie and Ken can’t do that unless they are married because it’s a sin and because good girls don’t do things like that. Let’s set up a wedding and get them married.” I was excited! Mom was finally going to play Barbie with me. My mother sewed Barbie a beautiful white wedding dress out of white material she found in her closet. She combed her hair and expressed how excited Barbie was that she was finally going to become a respectable woman and live happily ever after with Ken. My mother went as far as making real cupcakes as cake for the wedding. When it was time for Barbie and Ken to get hitched, my mother was the priest who officiated the ceremony. My mother was trying to instill a message in my brain about gender role expectations, but as a child, I did not know her intentions.

I have two sisters and one brother. My sisters and I agreed that my brother was my mom’s favorite. She did everything for him. She cleaned his room and bought him the latest fashions. As a child, I did not see the differences in treatment because my mother always said that housework belonged to the girls, so to me, it was

normal. My sisters and I had to clean our room ourselves, but my mom cleaned my brother's room. As girls, we had chores around the house like sweeping, washing dishes, and dusting, etc., but my brother only had to take out the garbage. As I grew into a teenager, I started seeing the unfairness more clearly.

When I was 15 years old, my oldest sister started to voice her opinion and talk back. When she did express herself, she would get slapped or punished. I saw my sister staying in her room for hours at a time, punished and sad. One time she got caught reading a romance novel and it was taken from her. My mother said that it was indecent for her to read such books. I saw my sister cry herself to sleep.

My sister and my mom's relationship was deteriorating before my eyes. One day, my sister did not come home. She had run away at only 16 years old. Even though I was seeing these things, I did not understand why my big sister was giving my mom such a difficult time. I cannot remember how many months passed, but eventually my sister returned. However, this time she was with a guy. She looked healthier, brighter, and stronger. Something was different. She was pregnant. My mom told my sister that she had to get

married because it is a sin to have sex outside of marriage. My mom went on to say that it did not look right for my sister to be unwed and pregnant. It was not long before my sister and her new boyfriend were married. This situation taught me that it was my destiny to be married to whomever I had sex with. If not, I would be sinning in the eyes of God. Just like Barbie and Ken.

When I turned 16 years of age everything started to change for me. I started to retaliate, and because I was not getting the treatment that I deserved at home, I started acting out in school. I felt so disrespected and voiceless at home. I was not going to let anyone outside the home silence me. I would get into fights at school when people tried to help me. I did not get in trouble at home because I never started the fights; I was just defending myself. My mother never questioned why I was fighting so much at school. She was just happy that I wasn't a punk and that I never lost a fight. Everything was different for my brother though.

When I was 18 years old, my brother was 16 years old. He could stay out until 12:00 a.m., but I had to be in the house by 7:00 p.m. My mom said that young ladies should not be out late because it makes them look "fast" and people might get the wrong impression

of them. Furthermore, my brother could have girls over to our house, but I could not have boys over to our house or even date. My mother used to say that you never know what could happen because a boy could take advantage of me and I could get pregnant, but a girl could not take advantage of a boy. I was always confused with my mother's views because they did not make sense to me. Yet, as "just a girl," who was I to question my mother?

Because of my confusion and anger, I would get upset and would start problems with my brother's girlfriends just to fight them. I figured that if I fought his girlfriends, they would not want to come over any more. If I could not have company, then neither could my brother. I took extreme measures to get fair treatment, but I had to do what I had to do and act radically to get my point across.

From 16 to 18 years of age, my mother and I did not get along. I would get into arguments with my mother because I wanted to voice my opinions, but there was no getting through to her. My opinions were not valued and were not important. I hated this with a passion. When my mother would scream at me, I would raise my voice louder. If I had the audacity to prove to

my mother that what I was saying made sense, my mother would slap me across the face. That was when I knew I made my point. The arguments would only last five minutes and they ended with getting slapped or storming to my room and crying myself to sleep. I just did not understand why I was being treated so harshly while my brother's life was so easy. This treatment hurt me and made me see my mother as weak instead of a strong woman. This treatment made me not respect my mother's views or even take her advice whenever she wanted to keep me safe. Because of this, I made a lot of mistakes in my life. But why did my mother feel this way?

My mother always told me that she wanted me to be better than her. I did not understand why she still wanted to keep me in the same bubble she was in. She said that I should find a husband, get married, and have children. I should keep a clean house and keep myself clean, and that I should keep my legs closed or men will talk negatively about me and call me horrible names. In my young mind, I did not care what any man said about me. My mom's words no longer mattered to me; they went into one ear and out the other. I did not respect my mother's words because I did not respect her views.

I remember at 18 years of age, I was a

senior in high school and I got into a relationship with a boy. I was surprised when my mother let me date him because he was the opposite of everything my mother wanted for me. I did this on purpose. But now I can see that the only reason my mother accepted him was because she had ulterior motives. Once my mother found out that he and I were having sex, she told me that I had to marry him. She tried to pull the same stunt she pulled on my big sister, telling me that it was a sin and this and that, but I said no. I am not marrying him. I am not Barbie and this is not a game. My life was not a game my mother could control. My boyfriend ended up breaking up with me because everything was just too much for him, and I did not blame him. Later in life, I ran into him and realized that if I had married him, I would have been miserable because of the person he had become.

A year later, I met another guy. I was 19 years old and he was 29. I became pregnant and we got married. I wasn't ready for marriage, but I guess my mom's shenanigans worked. It was so programmed in my head that it was the right thing to do. I married the father of my child even though I was not in love. My marriage lasted three years. With a two-year-old and a six-month-old, I

decided to leave my husband because I was not happy. I wanted more for myself; I wanted to be free. I did not want to be like my mom and be with a man who I was not happy with.

So, I bounced! I got a small two-bedroom apartment, saved up for five years, and then bought a home for myself and my beautiful children. I became an independent woman all by myself. Years have now passed and I am no longer angry at my mother. In fact, we have a good relationship. Rebuilding our relationship was not a walk in the park. I had to put my foot down many different times to let my mother know that she cannot control my life anymore. Trust me, it was not pretty. I no longer blame my mother for her treatment towards me and my siblings because it was all she knew at the time. But it had me asking, why did she react so negatively toward me as a girl growing up, and if she could go back in time, would she do things differently? Her reaction really made me aware that something was not right about my mother's views and my rights as a woman.

A Mother's Point of View...

Just listening to my mom's life stories and what she went through helped me have empathy towards her and put my

feelings aside. I sat with mom and I asked her to explain the reasons that she treated my brother differently than her daughters. She rolled her eyes at me and said “don’t start.” I explained to her that I am just trying to understand the reasons behind her behavior. This made her feel more comfortable.

My mother explained that when she was young she could go outside one hour per day, but her brothers could stay out until 9:00 p.m. I asked her if she felt upset that her brothers had more privilege than her, but she said no because it was normal treatment to her and she was used to it. My mother agreed that when she had daughters, she repeated the same treatment because that was all she knew. When asked if she could go back in time, would she treat her daughters differently, she stated that she would not because she wanted her daughters to have morals. She wasn’t going to have her daughters be used by men thinking that they were going to sleep and get her daughters pregnant with no commitment.

While talking with my mother, I brought up the time that my mother married Barbie and Ken, and she stated that she was trying to teach me that couples should not sleep together if they are not married. She said women

should have morals so that men can respect women. My mother said that at 16 years of age, she ran away from home with her boyfriend. When I asked her why she ran away, she stated that circumstances and problems at home made her leave. I asked her to elaborate. Annoyed, she said, “you know, problems because I started liking a boy.” My mother was married at 16 and by the age of 24 she already had four kids. She was married to my father, who was physically abusive, did not value her, and was constantly in and out of jail. It did not matter to her mother that she was so unhappy, it only mattered that she was married and not having sex and children outside of marriage. She finally divorced my father after he got eight years in prison for robbery.

I wanted to go deeper into my mother’s life, but she shut down. She did not want to talk any longer. I am not sure if she comprehends that the reason she ran away was because her mother was treating her differently than her brothers and that this caused the problems at home. After going through what she went through with my father, she still does not comprehend that having your daughters marry men who are not good for them, all to cover up a sin in her mind, is damaging for her daughters. Sometimes I think it is

because she does not want to admit that she was wrong because admitting she is wrong to her means that she failed as a mother. I do not think she failed as a mother at all. She made choices based on her upbringing and what she knew was right

Even after my experience growing up with my mother, she is a great woman in my eyes. I appreciate my mother because even though she had a rough life before and after divorcing my father, she kept her daughters safe and never had different men around us. She is God-fearing, family oriented, has a big heart, and loves to feed everyone.

Conclusion

I did not let my experience take my voice away. I became rough around the edges and able to take on anything that the world brings at me. It has helped me become an independent and strong woman and be more aware of the way that I treat my children. My sisters are all the same way. My brother is

currently in jail serving time. I mostly think the reason we are all strong and independent is because we decided to take the good aspects of my mother's views and make it better. This is not the case all the time and it does not apply to every woman.

Women have faced unfairness and inequality throughout history and get stereotyped and treated unequally every day. Gender discrimination in the home starts with parents and it is important for parents to be aware of these unfair treatments and the damages treatments like these can cause. I am lucky to have broken the walls down and be more aware of the double standards to ensure that my children are treated equally, but this is not the case with all women.

When I asked my children if at any moment they have ever felt that I treated them unfairly because of their gender they said "no, you treat us fairly, and we are free have a voice." My experiences have taught me that I am not Barbie, and I do not need a Ken

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