

Put in a Box

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Put in a Box

Libbie Rammage

A toy store contains many gadgets, gizmos, and playthings. In one aisle, numerous types of vehicles, action figures, and Legos stock the shelves. In the next aisle over, pink Barbie dolls boxes sit next to glittery princess dresses and tiaras. A society contains many diverse mindsets, appearances, and people. In one gender, they must “be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability” (Adichie 26). In the other, it is expected they “shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (Adichie 27). There is no grey area, no middle aisle, in which the differing ideologies mix; these stereotypes, like the toys, are stuck in their own boxes.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s book *We Should All Be Feminists* shows that society needs to start thinking outside of these gender boxes. Today, the toys on those shelves have begun to do just that, most notably, Mattel’s Barbie dolls. The growth shown within the world of the boxed up blonde Barbie is drastic and influential, and it is one that can be used to jumpstart a movement and social change concerning women in society today.

By defining the distinct expectations and stereotypes of men and women, Adichie indirectly explains the concept of gender-boxes. She states that by teaching boys to hide who they truly are, it “stifles the humanity,” (Adichie 26) resulting in an extremely severe definition

of masculinity. Thus, a theory has been created to visualize this manliness; it called the man-box.

Axe, a leading male grooming brand, wanted to verify modern day masculinity and help men in areas they needed it the most, reasoning that “a world of liberated men is a better place for everyone — both men and women” (Heilman et. al). They decided to run a report on masculinity in society today. The most important take away from this report is that they recognize that the Man Box, and the act of breaking out of it, does not happen solely with one man, or even one gender.

Referring to a “set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society that place pressure on men to be a certain way” (Heilman et. al), the Man Box contains seven main parts of this set of beliefs. For example, in order to be a real man, one must be self-sufficient, tough, physically attractive, abide by rigid gender roles, heterosexual, hyper-sexual, aggressive, and controlling (Heilman et. al). Again, this concept is also addressed in Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists*, yet she introduces it as a “disservice to boys in how we raise them” (26). From a young age, society teaches young boys to be mentally, physically, and emotionally hard. There is no room for the softness that being a human entails. Because of the lack of raw and true emotion in males, Adichie argues that men’s egos become extremely fragile and weak (27). The ego issue is to be solved, according to our society, by women.

In this way, the concept of a Woman Box also exists. Adichie argues that society does a larger disservice to girls because “we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males” (27). By making themselves smaller and shrinking, the male gender automatically feels more superior.

This is why men are normalized as people in power. Society also tells girls they can be strong, smart, and successful, but not too much so, as it intimidates, threatens, or emasculates the man (28). Women are placed in a box just as men are. The defining characteristics here are almost the opposite but have more definite guidelines; women need to be dependent on the man (but not clingy), soft (but not whiny), and sexy (but not slutty). Similar to the characteristics of the Man Box, women must also be physically attractive, abide by rigid gender roles, and be heterosexual. These definitions are culturally created gender stereotypes, and ones society needs to stray from.

Both Adichie and Axe's report urge people to disregard these definitions and break out of the gender boxes. By stating that breaking out of the Man Box takes "everyone working together to change society's narrow views about masculinity" (Heilman et. al), the report shows the ultimate goal for gender equality and social justice. Adichie also explains this need for social change. In her concluding remarks, her powerful words reflect on the gender stereotypes: "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture" (46). Both pieces of work explain that these gender boxes must be dismantled and broken out of.

Action on this social change has been taken in the form of Mattel's perfect blonde doll, Barbie. By taking steps to dismantle the ideology of women being defined by this one example, this brand has begun to take baby steps in defying the Women Box stereotype. Barbie has been a household toy for many little girls since its creation but not without criticism of her unrealistic

body measurements and ethnocentric image. Recent years have shown changes in this. In January of 2016, Barbie introduced a line of 33 total new dolls with 4 body types, 7 skin tones, 22 eye colors, and 24 hairstyles (Pearson). Recognizing that women and girls do not come in one size or color, Barbie has now emulated this idea in their dolls. While steps are being taken to improve the physical stereotypes of women, there is a lot of work remaining, especially when it comes to women's role in society.

Barbie has addressed this concept as well. In 2014, go-getter Barbie added a new career to her already expansive resume of over 150 careers: entrepreneur (Grinberg). The Women Box does not have a spot for powerful, intuitive women; this occupation goes against the expectations of aspects of a female. The hope is that this image of strong, hard-working females in positions of power becomes normalized, eliminating the stereotype that males are the typical CEOs or businessmen. Adichie gives an example of this issue in *We Should All Be Feminists*, telling of her American friend who took over a managerial position from a male predecessor, who had been a "tough go-getter...blunt and hard-charging and was particularly strict" (22). Adichie's friend, imagining herself just as strict but a little kinder, took on the role with a more family-friendly aspect.

Because she was a female, this idea backfired on her. When reprimanded an employee on a forged timesheet, exactly as the previous manager would have done, the employee complained to higher people in power, stating she was "aggressive and difficult to work with" (22), and others explained they thought she would have brought "a women's touch to the job, but she

hadn't" (22). Adichie explains in simple terms that "it didn't occur to any of them that she was doing the same thing for which a man had been praised" (23). While Barbie has made steps to reduce the stereotypical image of male-dominated power positions, it is now time for society to change their outlook as well.

By breaking out of gender boxes, the world can become a more equal place, one where men and women are set the same human expectations. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that there is a problem with gender stereotypes, and Barbie is slowly but surely breaking out of her boxes, but it now society's job to change its mindset and all be feminists. As Adichie concludes on page 48, "All of us, men and women, must do better." The two genders, like the two aisles in the toy store, must create a middle ground in order to truly break free from their packaging.

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