

Barbie's feminist makeover

by Kristina Murkett



- 1 It looks like Barbie is having another makeover: last week toy maker Mattel announced that they were launching a range of dolls to honour women in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), making miniature models of pioneers such as US healthcare workers Amy O'Sullivan and Dr Audrey Cruz, Canadian doctor and campaigner Dr Chika Stacy Oriuwa, and – of course – Oxford vaccine designer Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert. Of all the awards Gilbert has received this year – a damehood, the Albert Medal from the Royal Society of the Arts, a standing ovation at Wimbledon – I'm sure she is most thrilled by being immortalised as a pant-suited plaything.
- 2 Whilst I am all for greater representation and diversity in toys designed for girls, I'm not convinced by Barbie's feminist rebrand. It's easy to see this as yet another example of a business trying to make a quick buck through attempting to improve their image; Barbie's sales had been nose-diving but the launch of various 'special release' additions (ranging from David Bowie to Rosa Parks) have helped to boost profits. But the idea that swapping Barbie's sequins for a stethoscope will somehow 'inspire the next generation of girls into STEM careers' is wishful thinking; at the end of the day, playing with a doll is still playing with a doll.
- 3 These additions have no impact on broadening girls' career aspirations. Take one study which found that girls are no more likely to consider medicine because they played with Doctor Barbie rather than Fashion Barbie, but girls who played with Barbies in general were more likely to have fewer career choices than girls who played with Mr Potato Head. If parents genuinely want to expose their daughters to careers they may not be aware of, whether that be a vaccinologist or a genetic researcher, then giving them a piece of pretty plastic 17.

- 4 Men dominate STEM industries for an array of reasons, but I can guarantee it is not because they played with Astrophysicist Action Man or Statistician Stretch Armstrong. They were, however, more likely to have been given other, more useful toys, like Lego or a toy telescope or a science kit. That's not to say that playing with dolls is inherently bad. Of course, it can help children to develop empathy and social processing skills, and I personally used to happily spend hours playing with figurines (although admittedly these were Pokémon rather than My Little Pony). 19, let's not pretend that a doll can make a child enthusiastic about engineering.
- 5 You can hardly blame Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert's rather bemused expression in the promotional photographs – after all, people with such accomplishments normally get large monuments in their likeness, or a Nobel Prize (although only ten women have ever won these in Chemistry or Physics), and it's hard to imagine a male scientist being transformed into a toy. Let's just hope that parents see through this gimmick; if you want your child to be interested in biology, then give them a bug-collecting kit, not a Barbie.

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