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GENDER INEQUALITY IN *BARBIE* FILM

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Abstract
This research discusses how gender inequality is portrayed in the film Barbie (2023), as well as how the main character, Barbie, faces and fights against these conditions. In Barbie Land, women have a dominant role and complete freedom, but the situation changes drastically when Barbie enters the real world and is confronted with a patriarchal social system that marginalizes women. This study uses a qualitative method with the theory of gender inequality from Judith Lorber as the basis of the analysis. Data was obtained through analysis of scenes, dialogue, and character interactions in movies. The results showed that Barbie experienced inequality in the form of visual harassment, neglect of her leadership skills, and unbalanced social pressure. Barbie's resistance to this inequality is manifested through her courage in expressing opinions, facing stigma, and forming her identity as a whole. This film conveys a strong message about the importance of gender equality and the need to fight against social norms that limit women.

Keywords: *Barbie movie, feminism, gender inequality, patriarchal society, women's courage*

Abstrak
Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana ketidaksetaraan gender digambarkan dalam film Barbie (2023), serta bagaimana karakter utama, Barbie, menghadapi dan berjuang melawan kondisi tersebut. Di Barbie Land, perempuan memiliki peran dominan dan kebebasan penuh, namun situasinya berubah drastis ketika Barbie memasuki dunia nyata dan dihadapkan pada sistem sosial patriarki yang meminggirkan perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan teori ketidaksetaraan gender dari Judith Lorber sebagai dasar analisis. Data diperoleh melalui analisis adegan, dialog, dan interaksi karakter dalam film. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Barbie mengalami ketidaksetaraan berupa pelecehan visual, pengabaian keterampilan kepemimpinannya, dan tekanan sosial yang tidak seimbang. Perlawanan Barbie terhadap ketidaksetaraan ini dimanifestasikan melalui keberaniannya dalam mengungkapkan pendapat, menghadapi stigma, dan membentuk identitasnya secara keseluruhan. Film ini menyampaikan pesan yang kuat tentang pentingnya kesetaraan gender dan perlunya melawan norma-norma sosial yang membatasi perempuan.

Kata kunci: Film Barbie, feminisme, ketidaksetaraan gender, masyarakat patriarki, keberanian wanita

Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a medium through which human experience is expressed, recorded, and interpreted. It captures not only imaginative ideas but also mirrors social realities such as cultural practices, power dynamics, and inequalities. In modern times, film has become one of the most prominent literary forms, combining artistic and narrative elements to present reflections of society. As Boggs and Petrie (2011) state, film is a powerful art form comparable to literature and drama because it conveys ideas through images, metaphors, and

dialogues. In this sense, films serve as cultural texts that both entertain and critique the realities of human life.

One of the pressing realities often depicted in literature and film is gender inequality. Gender inequality refers to the unfair treatment of individuals based on their gender, where women in particular are frequently subjected to discrimination, limited opportunities, and rigid social roles (Lorber, 2001). The feminist movement arose as a response to these inequities, challenging patriarchal systems that privilege men over women and advocating for equality in various aspects of life. In literature and film, feminism is often manifested through characters who resist, negotiate, or suffer under such unequal systems.

Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, is a cultural phenomenon that brings these issues to the forefront. The film initially portrays Barbie Land as a utopia where women occupy every position of power, from president to scientist, embodying a matriarchal society free from male dominance. However, Barbie's journey into the real world starkly contrasts this idealized vision. She encounters patriarchal structures, objectification, and double standards that reflect persistent issues of gender inequality in contemporary society. Through Barbie's experiences, the film explores the tension between societal expectations and individual identity, particularly for women navigating a world shaped by rigid gender norms.

The tension between Barbie Land and the Real World raises important questions about how gender inequality is represented in media and what messages such representations convey to audiences. How does the main character, Barbie, experience forms of gender inequality in her daily life and in positions of leadership? Furthermore, in what ways does she struggle against these unequal conditions, and how does her resistance reflect broader feminist ideals? These questions form the core of this study, which seeks to analyze the portrayal of gender inequality and female resistance in the *Barbie* (2023) film.

This research is significant not only because Barbie is an iconic cultural figure but also because the film provides a lens through which contemporary discussions of feminism and patriarchy can be examined. By focusing on the character's struggles and transformations, the study highlights how media texts shape societal perceptions of gender roles and the ongoing fight for equality.

Literature Review

Theories of Gender Inequality

Sandra Bem's **Gender Schema Theory** (1981) argues that children develop cognitive frameworks that shape their understanding of masculinity and femininity. Alice Eagly's **Social Role Theory** (1987) suggests that gendered behaviors result from societal expectations and divisions of labor. Judith Butler's **Performativity Theory** (1990) posits that gender is not innate but performed through repeated acts influenced by cultural norms. Albert Bandura's **Social Learning Theory** (1963) highlights that behaviors, including gender roles, are learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. These theories collectively explain how gender inequality is socially constructed, maintained, and resisted.

2.2 Previous Studies

Lorber (1994) emphasizes that gender is a social system embedded in institutions such as family, education, and work. Several related studies strengthen this perspective. A study on *Mulan* (2021) showed how the protagonist challenged gender-based restrictions in both daily life and war. Another study (2022) analyzed gender inequality in film festivals, finding systemic barriers for

women in leadership. A recent analysis of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Hill's *Heart in the Ground* (2023) demonstrated women's struggles against stereotypes, violence, and marginalization in family and social contexts.

Compared with these studies, the present research focuses on *Barbie* (2023) as a cultural text that uses metaphorical and visual strategies to critique gender inequality, offering a contemporary and popular-culture-based perspective.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the portrayal of gender inequality in *Barbie* (2023). The qualitative method is considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine social phenomena as represented in the film through interpretation rather than statistical measurement. Following Lorber's (1994) theory of gender inequality, the study focuses on how gender norms, stereotypes, and patriarchal structures are reflected in the characters, dialogues, and narrative of the film.

The primary data of this research are scenes, dialogues, and character interactions taken directly from *Barbie* (2023). These data were obtained by watching the film multiple times and reading its script to capture both visual and verbal representations of gender inequality. The secondary data consist of books, journal articles, and previous studies related to gender studies, feminism, and film analysis, which provide theoretical and contextual support for the analysis.

Data collection was conducted through several steps: identifying relevant scenes and dialogues, taking notes and screenshots of significant moments, and reducing the data to select only those that clearly depict gender inequality. Afterward, the data were categorized based on recurring themes, such as objectification, exclusion from leadership, and societal double standards toward women.

The analysis employed content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis was used to systematically categorize the data, while thematic analysis helped identify broader patterns and meanings within the film. Through this process, the study interprets how the main character, Barbie, experiences and responds to gender inequality, and how the film as a whole critiques patriarchal norms.

Results and Discussion

4.1 Gender Inequality Experiences by Barbie in *Barbie* (2023)

In this sub-chapter analyzes how the main character, Barbie, experiences gender inequality in *Barbie* (2023), aiming to show that women are still treated unequally compared to men through several key moments in the film's narrative.

4.1.1 Gender Inequality Experiences by Barbie in Daily Life

(TIME, 00:28:02-28:24)

Barbie:

Why are they looking at me like that?

Ken:

Because you're Barbie!

Barbie:

No. They're not me admiring. They're... staring. It feels aggressive. It feels like they're violating me with their eyes.

This dialogue shows Barbie's confusion and discomfort when encountering the male gaze and objectification, which she has never experienced before. Her expression that can be seen in the screenshot proved that Barbie is shocked and felt violated by people's eys. Her response "It feels like they're violating me with their eyes" emphasizes the psychological discomfort and the deeply ingrained societal behavior of viewing women as objects. This experience mirrors Essentials' (2002) concept of gender roles being socially constructed, where women in the real world are often reduced to their appearance and subjected to unequal treatment simply because of their gender.

(TIME, 00:40:33)

Sasha:

You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented. You represent everything wrong with our culture. You destroyed girls' innate sense of worth, and you caused centuries of female pain.

The dialogue between Sasha and Barbie highlights the criticism women face for being judged by appearance rather than character, with Barbie embodying patriarchal beauty standards despite her intentions. Sasha's remarks about "ideal" female traits such as beauty, perfection, and charm reflect the rigid expectations society still imposes on women, similar to traditional demands of obedience and refinement. This moment becomes pivotal for Barbie as it reveals how societal pressures and gender roles, as noted by Blackstone (2003), are socially constructed through interactions, ultimately shaping women's identities and values.

(TIME,01:14:11)

Gloria:

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You must be thin, but not too thin. And you can't say you want to be thin; you have to say you want to be healthy but also you must be thin. You must have money, but you can't ask for money, because that's crass. You must be a boss, but you can't be mean. You must lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas…

Gloria's monologue reveals the double standards and burdens imposed on women, echoing Le Moyne's view that true gender equality cannot be achieved by merely providing the same opportunities, as societal and cultural expectations still enforce distinct roles. In this moment, Barbie realizes, much like Mulan, that men are expected to lead through power while women are relegated to nurturing and self-sacrifice, a pattern reflected in the contrast between men celebrated for control and women confined to supportive roles. As Lucius explains, these differences are not based on ability but on socially constructed norms that continue to restrict women's potential.

(TIME, 01:13:07)

Barbie:

I'm not anymore. I'm not good enough for anything. I'm not even a stereotypical Barbie!

Gloria:

Because Barbie can be anything. And so can you.

Barbie:

But I don't feel like anything.

Barbie's emotional breakdown illustrates the intense pressure society places on women to maintain "perfection" in every aspect physical, emotional, and social. Her sense of failure mirrors Mulan's experience in the matchmaker scene, where a small mistake defines her entire worth as a woman. In the same way, Barbie's vulnerability and self-doubt make her feel ashamed in a world that demands flawlessness, as shown in the scene where she breaks down in tears.

Barbie's journey from Barbie Land to the Real World reveals the stark contrast between a utopian society where women hold power and the patriarchal reality marked by objectification, dominance, and rigid expectations. Her discomfort with the male gaze, Sasha's harsh criticism, and her emotional breakdown illustrate how deeply ingrained gender norms and double standards shape women's identities and self-worth. Gloria's monologue further emphasizes that these roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined, echoing the views of scholars such as Blackstone, Le Moyne, and Lucius. Ultimately, Barbie (2023) demonstrates that even iconic figures are not exempt from gender inequality, using Barbie's transformation from perfection to vulnerability as a critique of societal pressures while reinforcing that true empowerment comes from dismantling restrictive norms and valuing women beyond appearance and submissiveness.

4.1.2 Gender Inequality Experiences by Barbie in Terms of Leaderships and Power

(TIME,00:36:39)

Corporate Executive:

Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to announce a new leadership restructuring! Only those with the right experience and authority will take on executive roles. [Checks roster] The Johnson Family!

Son:

I'll take my father's place as CEO.

Corporate Executive:

And the Anderson Family!

Barbie:

No!

She steps forward, determined.

Barbie:

I have ideas that can change the world. I should be allowed to lead!

Executive:

Sorry, Barbie. Leadership is reserved for men. Women contribute in other ways.

In Barbie (2023), gender inequality is presented in a modern context as Barbie discovers that, unlike in Barbie Land where women are leaders and decision-makers, the real world privileges men in positions of authority while relegating women to traditional roles; refusing to conform, Barbie challenges these norms and strives to prove that she is equally capable of leadership and meaningful contribution.

(Time,00:51-59)

Barbie (confused and uncomfortable):

Why are they looking at me like that?

Gloria:

Welcome to Real World. That's just what it's like being a woman here.

Another strong example is Gloria's monologue, where she explains the double standards women face. Her expression that can be seen in the screenshot Barbie looks confused ,why humans look at him like that.

(**Time, 01:14:21)**

Gloria:

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... You must be thin, but not too thin... You must have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass... You must be a boss, but you can't be mean... You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time…

In Barbie, Gloria's speech and Barbie's shock at the Real World reveal how environmental factors (patriarchal society) shape what is expected of women just like Mulan's matchmaker scene. From the picture above Gloria's expression looks like he is angry while advising Barbie. Both texts criticize the internalization of narrow gender ideals, and how they pressure women to conform.

Barbie's journey into the Real World exposes the entrenched gender inequality that persists in leadership and positions of authority. Unlike Barbie Land, where women hold high-ranking roles, she encounters a society where leadership is largely reserved for men, while women are sidelined or confined to supportive roles. Her attempt to assert herself in a corporate setting is dismissed not because of her lack of ability, but because leadership is defined as a male domain. This contrast between Barbie's confidence and society's rejection reflects broader patterns in which women's contributions are undervalued, and leadership roles are often inherited and male-dominated. Gloria's monologue further underscores the impossible double standards women must navigate being assertive but not aggressive, successful but not intimidating pressures that discourage women from aspiring to positions of power.

These experiences align with gender theorists' arguments that it is societal structures, not individual capability, that limit women's access to leadership. Similar to Mulan's rejection by the matchmaker for defying traditional roles, Barbie is denied recognition in the corporate world despite her potential. Both characters symbolize resistance against patriarchal systems designed to suppress women's voices. Ultimately, Barbie (2023) critiques real-world power dynamics, highlighting how women's leadership is undervalued and actively suppressed, while also urging viewers to challenge patriarchal models and recognize that true equality demands structural transformation rather than superficial opportunity.

4.2 Character Struggle Againts Gender Inequality By Barbie In Barbie (2023) Movie

The focus of this sub-chapter is to explain how Barbie, as the main character, fights for her freedom and discovers the true meaning of equality.

4.2.1 Being Brave and Fearless

(Time,01:38:39)

In the middle of the night**, Barbie stands alone in the Mattel headquarters,** staring at the glossy posters of perfect dolls that have shaped society's expectations of women. She feels trapped, questioning whether she truly belongs in either world.

Barbie sits on a bench in the city, looking up at a billboard that reinforces unrealistic beauty standards. She wipes away a tear, feeling the weight of expectations pressing down on her.

It is beginning to rain**.** Through the window of a nearby café**, she sees women working tirelessly**, their voices drowned out by the conversations of men in suits.

Barbie takes a deep breath, her resolve strengthening. She knows she must break free from the mold that has been imposed on her.

She steps forward, removing her iconic pink heels, choosing instead to walk barefoot embracing her individuality rather than conforming to societal norms.

Barbie enters the real world, determined to redefine what it means to be a woman

The scene begins with narration as Barbie realizes the stark contrast between Barbi eland and the real world. She had always believed that women held power, but now she sees how deeply ingrained gender inequality is. It feels unfair why should she be treated differently just because she is a woman?

(Time, 00:37:36-00:37:38)

Barbie (facing the other Barbies and Ken):

You all used to have dreams. We built a world where women could be anything. But now everything has changed. I'm not just a pretty doll. I'm Barbie. I've been to the real world, and I know we are more than this."

Barbie 1:

You went to the real world?

Ken:

She's trying to ruin the Kingdom! She doesn't know her place.

Barbie 2:

But… what if she's right?

Ken:

She has no right to speak. She failed as Barbie.

Barbie (firmly):

I didn't fail. I just tried to be real. And now I know being real means being imperfect and still choosing to go forward.

After returning from the real world to Barbie Land, Barbie realizes that Ken has transformed everything into the Kingdom, and a patriarchal system now dominates. Barbie feels she has lost her identity and is no longer respected as a leader as she once was. In front of the other Barbies and Ken, she finally reveals her true self and speaks honestly about the changes that have occurred. His expression that can be seen in the screenshot, he is so arrogant.

(**Time**, **01:03:41 – 01:03:55**)

Barbie:

You can't do this. This is Barbie Land. The Barbies worked hard, and they dreamed hard to make it everything that it is! You… you can't just undo it in a day!

Ken:

Literally and figuratively, watch me.

A group of Barbies are gathered in confusion and disillusionment, after Barbie Land has been transformed into Kingdom. Suddenly, one woman Barbie herself steps forward and reclaims her voice. Once celebrated as a leader and symbol of female excellence, she is now questioned and diminished simply because she defies the new patriarchal order. Some even accuse her of causing chaos in Barbie Land. As the system now favors the Kens and silences the Barbies, she boldly speaks the truth: "I didn't fail. I just tried to be real. Their expression that can be seen in the screenshot, they are very serious Barbie.

(Time, 01:43;34-01;42:36)

Barbie:

I want to be part of the people to make meaning not the thing that's made. I want to do the imagination I don't want to be the idea.

Ruth:

Being a human can be pretty uncomfortable.

This moment captures Barbie's inner bravery. Instead of clinging to a flawless persona, she opts for authenticity, showing that true courage is choosing vulnerability and purpose over perfection. Their expression that can be seen in the screenshot, they talk seriously but not tense.

In *Barbie* (2023), bravery is depicted not as physical power but as emotional strength and sincerity. Barbie resists patriarchal dominance by standing firm in her identity and embracing the discomfort of truth rather than the illusion of perfection. Her determination to voice her beliefs and pursue a meaningful life conveys the message that genuine courage comes from being authentic, vulnerable, and unapologetically true to oneself.

4.2.2 Being Responsible

(Time,00:24:54)

In the dialogue, Barbie admits her mistake of leaving Barbie Land without realizing its consequences and expresses her determination to restore balance with courage and sincerity. This highlights her sense of responsibility, as she no longer clings to an image of perfection but instead embraces humility, acknowledges her flaws, and commits to making things right, thereby regaining the trust of the other Barbies.

(Time, 01:42;26-01:42:31)

Ruth:

Humans have only one ending. Ideas live forever.

Barbie:

I want to be part of the people to make meaning not the thing that's made.

Barbie chooses to embrace imperfection and humanity. She no longer wants to be a flawless symbol but someone who creates meaning through action. This is her moment of taking responsibility not just for Barbie Land, but for her own identity. Her expression that can be seen in the screenshot, she is very serious.

(Time,01:13:48-01:13:51)

Gloria:

It is literally impossible to be a woman...

You must never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line... And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.

Gloria articulates the heavy emotional weight that women endure, making Barbie realize the reality of inequality and the hidden responsibilities placed upon them. This speech becomes a pivotal moment that motivates Barbie to take action, driven not by guilt but by empathy and awareness, as reflected in Gloria's serious demeanor.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The *Barbie* (2023) film portrays gender inequality through objectification, stereotyping, and social pressure. However, it also illustrates resistance, as Barbie challenges patriarchal norms through bravery, responsibility, and identity reconstruction. This study shows how popular films not only reflect but also critique social inequalities, making feminist messages accessible to broad audiences.

Future research could compare *Barbie* with other contemporary films to examine how global cinema contributes to discussions of gender equality.

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