

13. Will my son grow up to be sexist?¹

Abir Kopty

I'm not a perfect mother, nor do I aspire to be one. Perfection is not absolute, anyway. Everywhere has its own "perfect mother," and everywhere has people who reject that particular cookie-cutter ideal. I don't want to be like anyone else at all. Nor do I want to bend over backwards to live up to the list of regulations and standards that society has decided should be my measuring stick. My measuring stick is not straight and fixed. It is broken, full of fissures and holes. It may have been produced by society once, but I have since deconstructed and reconstructed it time and again using my own awareness, experiences, knowledge, issues, and my critical thought.

The day my child was born, I started on an ever-changing and ever-lasting journey to ask questions and look for answers I don't always find.

My child is a boy. A beautiful and innocent boy born in Berlin, a long way from our families. Most of what he knows about the world comes from his father and me. Although raising a child here is difficult and challenging, I hoped to protect him from the contradictions of our approach to parenting and that of our families. Wherever you live, however, you will still find contradicting norms, that is unless you decide to go with whatever others are doing.

One day I went to pick him up from the kindergarten and found him wearing a dress. At the time, he was obsessed with dressing up in costumes of all kinds. I laughed and told him I loved his new outfit. The same thing happened the next day, this time with his father, who reacted the same way I had. We communicate a lot about his upbringing and that meant we were prepared for the challenge. Many more situations will come to challenge us in the future, some that we won't be prepared for, and that we might fail.

It turned out that three-year-old Mina had heard a very different response from another parent: "Dresses are for girls." This one stuck in his mind. We told him it

1 Acknowledgment: The article was originally published online at (<https://jeem.me/en/society/abir-kopty/will-my-son-grow-be-sexist>) on 13 July 2020 by Jeem, "a feminist media organization that envisions a world where the dominant narratives in the Arabic-speaking region and its diaspora are inclusive, and defy patriarchal norms." The original contains the original Arabic audio message to the author's son. The article is reprinted here in its translation by Katharine Halls from the original in Arabic by permission of the organization.

wasn't true, and that he could wear whatever he felt like. We raised the issue at the kindergarten and with his teachers. They assured us that they agreed with us and already spoke to the father in question. The next day they pinned an article titled *Boys Can Wear Dresses Too* up on the wall to make sure all the parents got the message.

To be honest, and the more we think about it, the more we realize that we may have been less than honest with him. In our society and the vast majority of others as well, dresses are considered to be for girls. I wear dresses, but his father does not. In the street, he sees women in dresses, but not men. He might realize one day that we lied to him. Or maybe he'll grow up and come to the conclusion that things are neither black nor white—a far greater lesson learned to be honest.

I also lied about my commitment to challenging the stereotype of pink for girls and blue for boys. I hate pink. I cannot remember ever consciously wearing it. I refuse to dress my son in pink for the same reason. I dress him in blue, green, yellow, red, etc. but never in pink. I have thought long and hard about this stereotype and came to the realization that the issue goes deeper than the decision to dress in a certain color. It is an issue of what is permitted for boys but forbidden to girls. So, I may have not lied after all. With time, Mina will become more aware and conscious of social codes of conduct. It will become more and more difficult to protect him from the weight of stereotypes of how boys and girls are allowed to behave, including everything from games, toys and clothes to life choices like friendships, staying up late, traveling, living independently, acquiring skills, finding a job, one's relationship with their body, love, sex, sexual pleasure, and so much more.

When Mina became familiar with the concept of boys and girls, he realized that he was a boy, I am a girl, and his father was a boy. What's the difference? "Penises and vaginas" is the blunt, straightforward answer we have always given him. But when he gets older, that will no longer be the main difference. "Penises and vaginas" was the simplest answer I can think of for a three-year-old. As he gets older, we will need better knowledge and tools to help him understand that sexual organs are not how to define a person's gender or sexual identity. I still don't have all the answers and I feel ill-prepared at the moment.

I use the most basic terms possible because of his age, telling myself that he needs time to get ready for more complexity. I remember once meeting a sex education specialist in the course of my work as a journalist, and one of the most important pieces of advice she gave was that when children ask questions, they need answers that are simplified and appropriate to their age. The simplicity and rationality of these words brings me comfort when in doubt.

Mina has never heard the word 'ayb in our house.

The word 'ayb, a reprimand used when something is shameful or inappropriate, embodies so many repressive rules that generally apply to girls and not to boys. Although my son enjoys the privileges of being male, to bring a child up with the word is to anchor that privilege deeply within the man he will one day be—the same privilege we women are constantly fighting against. So, he will grow up without that word.

Mina doesn't see conventional roles played out in the house. Cooking is mainly my responsibility, while cleaning is my partner's, and we share the other tasks. This division of labour came about over time without us ever talking about it. It just made the most sense, because I love cooking and he hates it, while he's fanatical about tidiness and order and I'm chaos itself when left to my own devices.

I also regularly change the words of the stories I read or songs I sing to Mina when they contain conventional gender roles or sexist messages. As he grows, he will no longer depend on me for songs and stories. Then, he might discover the artificial nature of the utopia I made up for him. He may be shocked to discover reality as it is. He may even feel alienated in the same way we grow more and more alienated as our critical thinking develops in adulthood. Then again, I could simply be excessively anxious about the future and the challenges it will inevitably throw our way. All I know is that I'll talk to Mina about all of this.

Our decision to raise our child without traditional assumptions and stereotypes is an ongoing process that demands constant and conscious appraisal of how we behave. For example, we recently moved houses and bought some furniture to assemble at home. That was definitely not going to be my task—not just because I didn't know how, but because I was brought up in a way that taught me that I could not and should not be good at it. Without giving the matter much thought, I let my partner do it. He finished the first item and said: "You should do the next one, so Mina doesn't think that it's always my job to do it." Oh! I had overlooked that detail. I eventually managed, with my son's help, to put together the bathroom cabinet. Mina helps us with all the household chores, and even though he has a tendency to be lazy, we involve him in cleaning, tidying, arranging, and cooking. He will not be raised as a Si Sayed², as most men in our societies are.

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- 2 "Si El-Sayed, the authoritarian father figure of Egyptian novelist and Nobel Prize laureate-Naguib Mahfouz's most famous work, "The Cairo Trilogy", has become an Arabic synonym for monstrous male chauvinism" (Naguib Mahfouz, 2006), as written in "Fictitious Characters in the Classroom: Using Literary Characters in Teaching English Language" by Ibrahim Mohamed Alfaki (p. 37); A fictional character in Naguib Mahfouz's 'Cairo Trilogy', which acquired the (common) meaning of "a controlling and demanding husband," the distinctive traits of 'Mr. Sayed' in the trilogy. This name has also come to be used in everyday life as a common

It would have been impossible to raise a non-sexist boy if his father was one. Yet the dynamic of our relationship remains complicated, subtle, and, at times, problematic. Who decides what? Who is responsible for what? Who is emotional and who is tough? Who gets riled up and who reacts calmly? Who is firm and who is “weak” in resisting tears? Who can control their reactions—when, for example, our son falls over—and who cannot? Who knows how to do certain things and who does not? Who asks for and pays the bill in restaurants, and who never gets involved? And so many other questions besides. It is an ongoing, dialectical relationship between two people trying to free themselves from conventions and received wisdoms they reject, and ever more of its complex inner workings are revealed when it becomes a shared journey through parenthood.

I remember that as a teenager, whenever I asked my father for permission to do some activity, he would always tell me to ask my mother. My mother would then tell me to ask my father. Eventually, I would get sick of the back and forth and give up on the activity all together. If they hesitated to take any clear decision, it was because they knew nothing but a world of taboos. Taboos frightened them so much they avoided any responsibility in me being allowed to do things like going to a party with school friends, sleeping over at a girlfriend's house, or taking part in outings with friends that weren't organized by the school, etc. Even if I eventually snatched a permission to do something, the ordeal slowly ingrained in me the conviction that some requests were difficult and prickly, and that I should just avoid making them. And so, their relationship dynamic spelled out unspoken rules for me to live with. When I got older and they grew to trust me, the boundaries of what was permitted changed, and they gave me a lot of space and freedom, but that too took place quietly, and was never clearly or directly spoken.

If boundaries must be set, then these are not the kind of boundaries I want for my son. If I could go back in time and be in my parents' shoes, I would want to answer my daughter differently, for example: “Let's talk about it,” “Here's what I think,” or maybe “I can't make such a decision by myself, I probably need to talk to your mother/father about it first.” Later, I would get back to her and say: “That's what we think, but we want to hear what you think, let us have a conversation.”

That's how I wish it was when I was young. I acknowledge that this utopia I strive for cannot exist while we all live in repressed societies that are restricted in what could or could not be said. It is an impossible utopia for societies which, deprived of the means for self-determination or transformation, will turn around and seek to impose tyrannical control against the freedoms of their members. How can parents allow their children a freedom of expression they do not enjoy? If there's one

noun describing a man with similar traits.” as written in “Lexical Issues of UNL: Universal Networking Language 2012 Panel”, edited by Ronaldo Martins.

thing we can do, it is to not burden our children with our pain and to stop using our helplessness as an excuse to take out on our children.

Having a child made me realize that the way we are raised, whether we liked it or not, is the main reference on how to parent. I do not resent my parents for the way they raised me, nor do I love them any less, but I am critical. I have seen different experiences and learned a lot. I have also met many who were less fortunate than I was, and learned from them.

I took the decision to never shy away from a conversation with my son. I will encourage him to ask any question that occurs to him, be it about a certain type of dinosaur or the reason someone stole Baba's bicycle. He will be allowed to talk about as many dinosaurs he would like.

He will certainly be allowed to talk about the fearsome dinosaur of emotions. What will I do when he needs to cry? In theory, I believe tears are nothing to be ashamed of, all feelings are legitimate. However, I had to remind myself, more than once, to not fall in the trap of "boys don't cry." But I also struggled with my image of myself, that of a mother who does not want her son to be weak and cry over anything and everything. I am still looking for the balance between validating his emotions, on the one hand, and encouraging him to talk about them rather than cry on the other. When he falls over and gets hurt, he will cry and that is ok. I will cuddle him, show him love, and let him cry. But if another child steals his toy, crying will do him nothing, and he will need to articulate why he is upset and demand his toy be returned. Regardless of the situation, I will always teach him that there's nothing weak or shameful in expressing how he feels. I will do everything I can to create a supportive, respectful environment in which there is space for his feelings.

The outside world still exists, not just the Arab world, and it will jeopardize all our plans. And yet, I want him to go out and learn from his own experience, as I once did. I know I will sometimes trip and make all kinds of mistakes. I also know that he might grow up to rebel and dislike the way we raised him. That battle is one I'm not ready for yet.

With all these challenges in mind, there are things I want for Mina when he grows up. I want him:

- To never accept stereotypes and conventions, but to be critical of the habits and values of any society he lives in.
- To never shy away from, or be embarrassed by his feelings; for example he should never be ashamed to cry.
- To freely explore his gender and sexual identity for himself and to be proud of his identity and decisions.
- To be an equal partner in his romantic relationships, be they with men or women, and neither dominate or be dominated.

- To take responsibility for himself, to undertake tasks that have always been assigned to women, and above all, to see that as normal.
- To be strong and confident of who he is, and not to give in to the temptation of society's version of masculinity.
- To never allow himself to be domineering, superior, or oppressive, especially towards people less fortunate in life than himself.
- To possess a strong sense of justice and to stand up against oppression, whether it happens around him or far away.

When Israa Ghrayeb, a young Palestinian woman, was killed by her family, many people, both in Palestine and beyond, were deeply shaken, including myself. I wrote and recorded a message to Mina which he may one day read, hoping that this crime could open up a conversation about how we may one day create a masculinity aware of the social burden upon its shoulders and the role that men should play in confronting that oppression.

You can listen my message to Mina here³:

Translation of the audio recording

My dearest son,

You're still small, but soon, when you're a bit older, you will realize monsters exist. Those monsters may have once been oppressed, abused, and living under occupation, they also oppressed those weaker than them. One day, you will all this yourself.

Never think that you are entitled to ever be a monster just because you were born a boy. Don't think that having a penis gives you privileges and power over girls. When you get older, people will try to tell you that boys are better than girls, and that they can tell girls what to do. When you get older, they will try to fill your head with strange words like "shame," "honour," and "sin." When you hear these things, don't just accept them, talk back, ask questions, and disagree.

If one day you have a sister, people will try to tell you that you are better than her, and that you are allowed to do what she is forbidden. If one day you decide to share your life with a woman, they will tell you that you are the man of the house and that she and her body are yours. If you have children, and one of them is a girl, they will tell you that her virginity and her hymen are your lifelong obsession, that no matter how much you love her, you can never trust her or her decisions, and that the small talk of monsters outside matters more than her life.

3 Listen to the embedded sound recording online <https://jeem.me/en/society/abir-kopty/will-my-son-grow-be-sexist>).

My dear son, we may never be able to free our homelands or our societies, but we – your father and I – vow to do everything we can to keep you free of the monster that people will try to plant inside you.

I know that parenthood is an enormous responsibility. I know that such a responsibility becomes even more important when we live in an unjust world that oppresses our daughters and sons, even more so because we decided to be open-minded and live according to our standards rather than those forced upon us. I also realize that the decision my partner and I made to raise our son in a way that will ultimately free him – to some extent at least – from the constraints imposed upon him and the privileges granted to him as a boy, will be a relentless and exhausting undertaking that will require us to resist the forms of domination which exist in our own relationship, and to be creative in both the way we treat him and the way we protect him from the society around him. We must find freedom for ourselves before we can make it our gift to him.

