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RECLAIM YOUR CONFIDENCE.**



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For women.

For the ones who came before us – who fought, sacrificed and endured so that we might have the freedoms we hold today.
For those who suffered under oppression, silenced and unseen.

For trans women, our sisters in arms – because none of us are free until we all are. For every woman still fighting for equality.

For all our male allies. We need you as much today as we did yesterday. Thank you for lending your voices to us.

And for our daughters, especially my own – my Ada.
May you grow up in a world of equal opportunity, unshackled by double standards, and free to live boldly as yourselves.

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‘Until the lion learns how to write, the story will always glorify the hunter.’

—African proverb

BOSSY / DRAMA QUEEN /
ATTENTION SEEKER / DIVA / COW /
PRUDE / FRUMPY / FRIGID / COCK-TEASE /
TART / SLUT / WHORE / HO / DYKE /
PICK-ME GIRL / BIMBO / AIRHEAD / BIRD /
POSH TOTTY / CAT LADY / CRAZY /
SPINSTER / FEMINAZI / BITCH /
GOLD DIGGER / NEEEDY / HYSTERICAL /
BRIDEZILLA / TROPHY WIFE / WAG / NAG /
BALLBUSTER / BALL AND CHAIN / MUMSY /
MILF / HOMEWRECKER / COUGAR /
BATTLE AXE / MUTTON / WITCH / HAG /
MATRON / BIDDY / BINT / CRONE

INTRODUCTION

These are just some of the words we use to keep women and girls in their place. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has been called several of them. And I'm sure I'll hear plenty more as I continue my journey through womanhood into middle and old age, before I'm expected to become invisible.

My daughter Ada is two years old. When I look at her, I see a girl who is confident, loud and proud. A girl who looks at herself in the mirror with love, amazement and wonder. She loves her body. She's not scared to speak her mind and tell us NO. She's happy. When I look at her, I see myself as a child. Because that was me too once. Probably you too. No little girl is born a 'bimbo'. Nor does she arrive into the world as a 'prude', 'bitch' or 'slag'.

So why is it that, by the time we enter our twenties, many of us feel so small? When we look at our bodies, we no longer feel wonder and awe, but shame and worry? We stop feeling comfortable saying no because we worry that will make us unlikeable. We start believing we're not enough on our own and we need to find our 'other half' to be complete. We're taught to downsize ourselves – to be slight, quiet and palatable. I felt like this for most of my teens and adult life, but when I reached twenty-seven, something snapped and I just couldn't take hating myself anymore.

I set off on a journey of self-love and discovery, and started exploring my own path, one that led me to question the outdated labels, rules and expectations placed on women. As I dug deeper into where these pressures come from, I started to uncover more about our history as women and the oppression and injustices our ancestors suffered. So much of our present is also the past, filtered through the expectations placed upon us today. I realised that my insecurities, lack of self-esteem and faltering confidence were so completely wrapped up in the various messages I'd learned about what it means to be a *good* or *attractive* or *acceptable* woman. And perhaps, even more, it was all tangled up with the double standards everywhere in society – with one benchmark for women and an entirely different one for men.

To rediscover my confidence, I had to untie all the knots about womanhood that were eating me up inside. To unlearn anything we've been bred to believe, we first need to understand it. This book will tell the story of how I got there. Spoiler alert: for me, the secret to self-acceptance was feminism.

Have you ever read something on social media, or sat in a group of women or men talking about feminism, and found yourself feeling completely lost? If so, you're not alone. I definitely didn't fully understand it myself for a long time. And much to my embarrassment now, I even held a slightly negative view of feminists and the movement as a whole. Aside from the fact that many feminist messages are drowned out by those in positions of power, over the past 150 years, their message has been twisted and turned upside down successfully by those who want to maintain the status quo. The bra-burning, man-hating feminist caricature is useful because it turns women against their own interests. It makes us feel that feminism is not for us. I certainly didn't identify with the 'feminazis'.

What I've learned, over the years, on my journey from girlhood to womanhood, is that society tries to keep us in all kinds of boxes. And one of the most powerful tools it uses to keep us there is language. Words have the power to shrink us, to shame us, to keep us small. But it's only by breaking free from these pigeonholes and labels, by ditching the stereotypes and expectations, that we can begin to live unapologetically.

Growing up, we were probably all scared of the words in the list at the beginning of this book. But I hope, through reading these pages, you will soon realise that you're *not* a failure if you have been called them. These words are used to police us and to keep us on track re what society calls 'normal' femininity. But not all of us are built to stay on the rails.

I want to challenge some of the norms and traditions, the expectations and milestones, and encourage women to question them too. To push us all to see that we deserve more. I'm sharing my own experiences in the hope that you don't make the same mistakes I have. Or that, if you have, you can feel less alone and stop beating yourself up over them. Whether you're going through a break-up, feeling like the eternally single one, choosing to be child-free, or struggling with the invisibility of motherhood – there's something in these pages for *you*.

Women often message me asking for help finding the words they need to stand up for themselves – whether it's pushing back against the opinions of partners, parents or employers. Often these men and women – the ones being pushed back against – aren't bad people, they just hold on to outdated views about how women should behave. So many of us lack the vocabulary to advocate for ourselves. We certainly weren't taught it in school. Many of us weren't taught it at home either. By telling my stories, I want to help you reclaim your own

voice, and hopefully, in doing so, you'll begin to regain the confidence of that little girl you once were – piece by piece.

This book will confront the insults, labels and expectations that women face every day, and show how understanding them and stepping outside of them can lead to a bigger, freer life. While my path is my own, and I fully recognise my privileges, I hope you'll see parallels with your own experiences. I hope you'll begin to spot all the ways the world tries to keep women small, compliant, and afraid to take up space. My main take-away is that the seemingly endless list of derogatory terms are just easy ways to punch down. You can't win – you're either a 'slut' or a 'prude'. These gendered words are there to keep us in those boxes and make us behave in a way that men find palatable.

Women are *still* constantly pitted against each other. So many of us have internalised the belief that, in order to succeed, we have to one-up each other. It's the same tired binaries: madonna versus whore, mothers versus child-free women, tomboy versus girly girl, too fat or too thin, grow old gracefully or fight the ageing process, Hailey versus Selena . . . Even though we are in a much stronger position socially, culturally and financially than we were a hundred, fifty, even ten years ago, it feels like women's rights are being rolled back around the world. I hope this book is a rallying cry to bring us all together to fight – not just to protect the rights we've gained, but to keep pushing for the ones still out of reach. We all share a common goal, and we can only get there together. We've got to remember that lifting each other up is the aim, not dragging each other down in the service of a system that wants to divide and conquer us.

Bimbo isn't a memoir, but it does tell some stories from my life. This book is based on my own experiences and

thoughts – thoughts which are always changing and evolving. If there are parts of it that you disagree with, *good*. It's important to acknowledge that there isn't one way to do womanhood. No one rule about how to be a feminist. We are all doing our best in a world of mixed messages and I, like everyone else, am full of contradictions. I want to be unflinchingly honest in these pages, and that means sharing all parts of myself, including my mistakes and imperfections. I am by no means a finished product. I'm still constantly unpicking and unlearning and even cringing at things I used to think or say. You may feel that way too, so I just want to mention that I'm not on any kind of pedestal either. I'm no feminist scholar with lots of letters after my name; I'm learning about feminism as I go. Instead, I am just a girl who was born confident, spent a chunk of my life losing that confidence, then the next part getting it back.

While I am focusing on living within a patriarchy – a society largely shaped by men, for men, which prioritises male needs, ambitions and desires at the expense of women – it's important to acknowledge that other systems also shape our experiences.

White supremacy, for example, operates through a racial hierarchy that affords white people better treatment and greater access to power. Capitalism is an economic system built on maximising profit, often for a few people at the expense of many. Class plays a huge role too, influencing not just the resources we have access to, but how seriously we're listened to, how we're judged, and how free we are to speak up. Nepotism grants access and opportunities to those with the right family connections. And many religious codes continue to privilege straight men and reinforce traditional gender roles.

Depending on the colour of your skin, the amount of

money you have, the schools you and your parents went to, your sexual orientation, or whether you identify as a man, a woman, or outside that binary, you're going to face greater or lesser challenges in life.

This book is written from my own lived experience as a white, cisgender woman navigating life in a patriarchal society. As such, much of my language is gendered, reflecting the realities I've personally faced and the systemic sexism that disproportionately affects women. But let me be clear: feminism is for everyone. The fight for gender equality must include men, trans women, non-binary people, and anyone whose identity challenges the rigid gender norms imposed by patriarchy. The same system that tells women to shrink also harms those who don't conform to traditional expectations of gender and sexuality. Our liberation is bound together. As a white woman, I know I have a responsibility to use my voice to support Black and brown women who face the compounded barriers of racism. Because if white women aren't bringing others with us in the fight for equality, what we're asking for isn't equality, it's privilege.

These themes are often dismissed today as simply being *woke*, but I would argue that is just another example of how those in power seek to divide us and maintain inequality. Unlike the weaponisation of the term 'woke', none of these ideas are new. Capitalism has been critiqued since the beginning of the industrial revolution; working-class movements and labour strikes have challenged class inequality for centuries; atheism gained traction in the late eighteenth century; white supremacy has been challenged since the beginning of the abolitionist movement; and the first wave of feminism started in 1848 with the first women's rights convention. Don't

let anyone convince you that caring about inequality or injustice is fake news, or some kind of modern-day hysteria.

Over the years, my dismay and frustrations with the status quo have been transformational, and my rage has fuelled me to question why things are the way they are. I've become more curious about gender roles and the expectations that are placed on us from the moment we are born. I've desperately wanted to unravel why we so often accept the timelines, milestones, limitations and rules prescribed for women as if they were predestined, just because we were born female.

My rage isn't just about the collective experience of being a woman, but also the personal injustices so many of us face individually. The unfair double standards, the sexism, the hyper-sexualisation of our bodies, the uphill battle for equality. When I look back on a lot of what I went through in my girlhood, my adolescence and my early twenties, I feel a deep sadness for the child and young woman I once was. I also hold a lot of regret at how much I tolerated.

When I found myself single in my late twenties and early thirties, I became acutely aware of the imbalanced and frankly outdated pressures still placed on women. Instead of breaking me, that time lit a fire inside me. I began to realise that so many of the things that had stripped me of confidence were never my fault. And I hoped I could help other women and girls recognise how their experiences, drip by drip, had done the same.

Motherhood deepened my feminism in a way that surprised me. So much so that a good third of this book is about the discoveries I've made and the wild ride it has been. It was only once I became a mother myself – to a little boy called Alfie and a daughter called Ada – that I realised how much I had judged other mums, and how much of that came from internalised

misogyny. That perspective has only strengthened my desire for change and understanding. Once I found my voice and confidence, I vowed never to be silent again.

No little girl is born a ‘bimbo’. She doesn’t arrive into the world as a ‘prude’, ‘bitch’ or ‘slag’ – nor any of the endless insults the English language has created to dismiss, reduce and disempower women.

In so many ways, I feel that I owe this book to my daughter. I owe it to all our daughters. And maybe our sons too.

So, let’s begin.

Content warning:

This book contains descriptions of sexual assault, bullying, self-harm, body hatred and fat phobia, pregnancy and childbirth.

BIMBO

'bɪm.bʊʊ

noun

a derogatory term for a woman who is considered physically attractive but intellectually vapid. The implication that beauty and intelligence are mutually exclusive reduces a woman to her looks, positioning her as superficial, silly and sexually available.

The *bimbo* is typically portrayed as hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualised, and often infantilised. She's dismissed as a joke, a liability, or an object of lust. The term has long been weaponised to discredit, objectify and belittle women – especially those who embrace femininity or express their sexuality.

In recent years, some have begun to reclaim *bimbo* as a symbol of empowerment – celebrating femininity, self-expression, and subverting the idea that being hot and clever are mutually exclusive.

Bimbo. That's what they call me when they disagree with me on TV. Not 'misguided'. Not 'uninformed'. Just . . . *bimbo*. Because I have blonde hair and breasts and the audacity to talk about politics. Because I sit on a sofa in makeup and a dress and speak with conviction. Because I don't smile sweetly while I say it. It's not about my ideas, it's about my very existence. Because I am a woman stepping out of the box she was given. Still feminine, still visible, still loud. Very much 'too much'. It's criticism and vitriol that none of the men I work with will ever receive.

'Bimbo' comes from the Italian word for 'little boy' and used to be used to describe both men and women. However, by the 1980s and '90s, it had shifted to become a very specific insult aimed at women who were attractive, hyper-feminine, sexualised, and therefore assumed to be stupid. A woman in heels couldn't possibly be clever. A woman with cleavage couldn't possibly have an opinion worth hearing. A woman with lip gloss couldn't possibly be serious. Because fashion is femininity and femininity is frivolous. Like all the other derogatory terms we will explore in this book, *bimbo* is a convenient label. One designed to dismiss and discredit us. To pop our confidence like a balloon. It's especially weaponised when women step into male-dominated spaces – like politics, business or media – and dare to stay feminine while doing it. But maybe that's the point.

I used to say I wasn't into politics. I thought politics was something men in suits did in rooms with no windows. Something dry. Something far away. *BORING*, I'd think. But over time, I realised that everything that made me feel small, ashamed, silenced or unsafe was political.

Being slut-shamed as a teenager? Political. Because laws, education and media narratives shape how female sexuality is viewed and judged.

Being pitied for being single in my thirties? Political. Because marriage and motherhood are still protected and privileged by legal, financial and social systems, reinforcing that a woman's value is tied to being partnered.

Being judged for getting childcare and going back to work? Political. Because the cost of childcare, parental leave laws and the lack of recognition for unpaid domestic labour are all decided by government policy.

Knowing that if I ever reported rape, I'd be put on trial more than the man who hurt me? Political. Because the criminal justice system has abysmal conviction rates for sexual violence.

All the derogatory terms that have been targeted at me through my life were meant to shut me up and to undermine my confidence. To make me back away from the fight. But they have had the opposite effect. I started reading and then I started talking. And, now, I'm lucky enough to be a regular voice on one of the UK's most iconic daytime sofas. On *This Morning*, I have the chance to speak up about social justice, to call out inequality, and to hold the powerful to account. And when I do, the insults and threats come flooding in online.

Of course, people aren't always going to agree with me – and that's okay. My aim isn't to be *right* (in any sense of the word!) but to encourage people to consider a different perspective. We all come from different lives, backgrounds and circumstances, so of course we will see things differently at times. I'm learning and *un*learning daily, and my own opinions are always evolving. What I have come to realise is that my upbringing – and my journey from youth to midlife – is my superpower. I've mixed in different circles, I've lived in the north and the south, the city and the countryside. I understand the codes of farmers, but also the manners of aristocratic

landowners. I know how the rich see the poor – and how the poor see the rich. I spent so long feeling like an outsider, but now I know that life was showing me it all, giving me insight into different communities and their attitudes, and helping me see the systems that lie above and below them all.

I have come to understand that politics isn't something we can shy away from. It's in our homes, our classrooms, our bank accounts and our bodies. Every policy passed affects women – our health, our choices, our safety, our livelihoods. And yet the spaces where those decisions are made are still overwhelmingly male. If we believe that politics isn't for women, we will continue to be the ones paying the price. In the UK Parliament, just 35 per cent of our representatives in the House of Commons and the House of Lords are women. We're still a minority in the very rooms where our futures are decided. And when women do make it into those rooms, the sexism doesn't stop, it shapeshifts.

So even if you find politics to be dull and totally dry, like I once did, I hope this book helps show why it matters. I hope it persuades you to engage, to question and to form your own opinions and viewpoints on some of the topics I cover on this rollercoaster ride that is existing in a female body in 2025.

So here I am. 'Girly'? Yep. 'Political'? Absolutely. Guess what? This 'bimbo' can do both.



GIRLHOOD



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BOSSY

'bɒs.i

adjective

a word used to criticise someone, usually a girl or woman, for being assertive or taking charge. It implies overstepping or showing an undesirable level of authority and is often used to shame girls for showing leadership or confidence. A gendered reprimand that teaches girls early on that power and likeability cannot coexist, reinforcing the idea that women should be passive, agreeable and deferential.

Male equivalent: *Assertive, confident, a leader*

Note that none of these equivalent words are insults – there is no widely used male equivalent that carries the same critical, belittling tone. When boys and men show the exact same behaviours, they are usually praised or rewarded.

1.

Princess

Have you ever thought about how strange it is that, from the moment we're born, there are already expectations placed on who we can be – all depending on whether we're born a boy or a girl? Before we can even understand words, we're wrapped in pink or blue, handed princesses or dinosaurs, and praised for being pretty or strong. We're taught which colours are 'appropriate', what clothes to wear, and what toys to play with – all before we're remotely able to choose them for ourselves. And the rules are clear: pink for girls, blue for boys. Even if you don't follow these rules yourself, you'll be aware of them.

I was born in a hospital in the Northumbrian town of Hexham on an ordinary Thursday in 1987. That was the moment my parents found out they were having a little girl. By the time I had my own children thirty-four years later, things had changed – it had become far more common to know your baby's sex before the birth, thanks to ultrasound scans and advanced testing. These days, many people throw gender reveal parties with balloons, cakes and coloured smoke. I celebrated each of my babies with confetti cannons: blue for my boy Alfie, pink for my girl Ada.

When I was born, my parents' friends joked they'd need to lock me up because I'd be trouble. After leaving hospital as a baby, I came home to the dairy farm where I grew up and

I wore dresses and played with toys marketed for girls. Our family was fairly traditional – my dad was a farmer who drove tractors and took on the more ‘masculine’ roles, i.e. mowing the lawn, fixing things. He’s still the handiest person I know. My mum, despite working full-time as a hairdresser, was mostly responsible for the domestic duties and raising us.

Growing up on a farm gave me a very specific kind of childhood. Apparently, I once went around collecting dead rabbits and hugging each one, assuring them that ‘God would look after them in heaven.’ Another time, my mum came home to find dead moles propped up in the garden – I’d tried to save them by sitting them upright in their holes.

But when I wasn’t scooping up dead animals, I was playing with dolls, my Wendy house, and my toy kitchen. My favourites were always my Barbies. Mum once told me I came downstairs for dinner in a rush, explaining I had to be quick because I’d left Ken alone with all the Barbies and he wasn’t to be trusted. Clearly, I had an early understanding of sexual dynamics . . . While I pushed my toy pushchair, my older brother played with cars, tractors, dinosaurs and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Back then, I loved being called a princess. It felt like the highest compliment, and I was totally obsessed with the idea of being one. Mum once told me she’d heard me rustling around my room after bedtime for several nights in a row. One evening, curiosity got the better of her, and she came in to check. She found me fast asleep under my duvet, fully dressed in my princess costume. When she asked why, I replied, ‘I can’t go to the ball in my pyjamas. The prince won’t pick me.’ Tell me you watched too many Disney films without telling me you watched too many Disney films . . .

When I wasn’t dressed as a princess, I wore pastel-coloured

dresses, skirts and tops. Looking back, some of the outfits were peak '90s: lime-green dresses with oversized black polka dots, worn with matching giant ribbons. My brother dressed up as superheroes and wore classic 'boy' clothes.

By the time I started school, I had a very clear idea of what it meant to be a girl – and what it meant to be a boy. Of course, I don't remember those early years in detail, so I didn't feel the social conditioning tightening around me. I didn't yet understand how certain behaviours are encouraged while others are quietly discouraged. As a child, I simply absorbed it all. It's only now, with the benefit of hindsight, that I can see those moments for what they really were: tiny but powerful nudges that shaped how I saw myself. Nudges away from self-worth, away from confidence, away from who I might have been if I'd been allowed to choose freely.

I didn't question any of it – not until I had children of my own.

2.

Like a Girl

Having children of your own really makes you reflect on the way in which you were raised, and how the messages you were taught shaped you. But it also forces you to question the world in which you're raising your own children, and the beliefs being instilled in them.

I noticed how the world treated my kids differently from the moment they were born. Well-meaning friends and family joked that Alfie would be a 'heartbreaker'. I hope not, I thought. By this point, I'd been on the receiving end of heart-break from several awful men and hoped Alfie would grow up with much more respect for people's hearts and minds. When Ada was born, she was met with the same public commentary I had been – jokes about needing to 'lock her up'. My partner Tommy even joked she wouldn't be allowed to date until she was thirty. 'Yes, she will,' I replied.

It made me realise how strange it is that we joke about locking up baby girls to protect them from boys. How strange our world is, where we're comfortable objectifying and projecting messed-up social standards onto infants? These descriptions might sound harmless – even affectionate – but they're early lessons in gender roles. What they actually teach is that boys can't be expected to control themselves around attractive girls, and that girls must be kept out of reach to protect

them from male violence. That girls must be policed to avoid bringing shame on the family. That boys who are handsome will inevitably cause pain. When you boil it down, it's all pretty grim – especially considering we're talking about babies.

And this is where victim-blaming starts. These throw-away remarks teach us that it's a girl's job to limit her freedom to accommodate male behaviour. That it's her fault if *something happens*, because she should have stayed safely indoors. To the dads who say their daughters won't be allowed to date until they're mature adults, I always want to ask – why? Who are you afraid they'll encounter? Men? If so, why don't we ever say we'll lock up our sons? The seeds planted by these comments grow into the belief that it's women and girls who must change, shrink or hide – rather than expecting boys and men to be better. That's a terrifying principle to grow up with.

Even the compliments differ. Alf is praised for being funny or clever. With Ada, it's almost always that she's beautiful. Of course, we're allowed to coo over babies if that's our natural response – and she *is* beautiful. But when was the last time you complimented a little girl, or her parents, on something other than her looks? I catch myself doing it too, because that's how we're conditioned to view female value, but I'm constantly correcting my own language. If a child is always praised first for being pretty or cute, it sends the message that looks are what matter most. In a world so obsessed with image, it's not a stretch for a child to start believing that being attractive is more valuable than being clever, kind, funny or capable. These messages shape our children's sense of themselves, and not in good ways.

Another common compliment Ada receives is being called 'a little princess'. I once laughed when my mum came down to visit and declared, 'Who's a little princess?' and Alf proudly

said, ‘Me!’ He’s unknowingly breaking down gender norms one comment at a time. I never call Ada a princess. Despite growing up obsessed with them myself, adulthood showed me how unrealistic and limiting the fantasy of being ‘picked’ can be. I don’t understand why we still push that fantasy. Especially when we’ve seen what happens to our real-life princesses, like Diana or Meghan, or even Kate. The role is still defined by the man you marry. Do I want my daughter aspiring to be someone’s prize? Or do I want her to dream bigger? She can love dressing up as princesses if she chooses to, in the same way that Alfie can, but I won’t push it on her.

Through following my children’s interests, I’ve come to learn how many of the ‘traditions’ I took as biological inevitabilities are actually just learned behaviours. We grow up thinking boys like boy things and girls like girl things, but most of it has nothing to do with biology.

Take pink and blue. If you ask Alfie his favourite colours, he will proudly tell you that it is ‘pink, purple, rainbows, golden sparkle and glitter’. Who can blame him – they are *great* colours! But I’m sure many would say they are ‘girly’ colours. Did you know that, as recently as 1918, pink was actually recommended for boys and blue for girls? Earnshaw’s Infants’ Department wrote: ‘The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger colour, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and daintier, is prettier for the girl.’

It wasn’t until after the Second World War that pink-for-girls and blue-for-boys began to stick, thanks largely to marketing. Then, during the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and ’70s, second-wave feminists pushed back against gendered conditioning, and pink fell out of fashion entirely.

There were two years in the 1970s when Sears, the American chain of department stores, didn't feature a single item of pink toddler clothing. But by the 1980s – with the conservative backlash and the rise of ultrasound scans – pink made a roaring comeback.

Walk into any children's clothing shop today and the gendered colours hit you straight away. Boys get blue, green, and slogans like 'Future Leader', 'Adventure Awaits' and 'Boss'. Girls get pink, pastels, and messaging like 'Pretty', 'Princess' or 'Little Cutie'. Even the animals are gendered. Boys are targeted with sharks, lions and dinosaurs – apex predators. Girls are served bunnies, butterflies and deer – gentle, vulnerable prey. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. Boys' clothes are practical, durable, and made for movement. Girls' clothes? Delicate, restrictive, and weirdly revealing. I've lost count of how many times I've gone to buy Ada a pair of shorts only to find they barely cover her nappy. Even toddler girls' clothes are shaped by adult ideas of female presentation. I love dresses, but Ada mostly wears trousers unless it's a special occasion, because so many girls' clothes are just so impractical. At the park, skirts and dresses trip her up and stop her being able to climb. It's clear that boys' clothes are made for exploring the world. Girls' clothes are made for sitting still and looking cute.

One moment that really forced me to question this gendered dressing was a couple of years ago when I shot a magazine cover with both Alfie and Ada. We had a stylist sorting the outfits, as is typical for shoots, and, on the day, Ada and I were dressed in beautiful dresses, while Alf was put in shorts and a T-shirt. He got really upset. He couldn't understand why we got to wear the pretty clothes, and he didn't. He insisted on wearing a dress, but there wasn't one in his size. I text Tommy and asked him to pick one up on his way home

and he came back with an Elsa dress. Alf beamed. 'I'm just like Mummy,' he said. For him, wearing the dress was about love and admiration for me. And I wondered, why don't we allow boys to look up to women?

That admiration shows up in toys too. Like many other boys, Alf has always loved dolls. They help him explore relationships, emotions, and care through play. I've noticed that some parents – and especially, from my experience, fathers – push back on boys playing with 'girly' toys. I often look at my partner pushing our kids in the pram and wonder how we ever convinced ourselves that dolls and prams are only for girls. It still blows my mind that roleplaying caregiving is so widely accepted as 'girly'. Men also care for children – it's called fatherhood. Playing with dolls fosters empathy, creativity and social skills – qualities that benefit all children, regardless of gender. Why wouldn't we want boys to be nurturing too? What could be more masculine than modelling what it means to be a good father?

Much like the colour divide, the strong gender split in toy marketing is a fairly modern invention. With the rise of mass production and booming consumer culture after the Second World War, gendered toy marketing ramped up. The 1950s and '60s saw a surge in ads reinforcing traditional gender roles: pink kitchen sets for girls, action figures and cars for boys. Despite feminist pushback, by the 1980s the divide held strong, and still does today.

Why do we tell boys they can't wear dresses, play with dolls or paint their nails? Is it deep-rooted homophobia? That fear some parents have that, if their son is 'feminine', he might be gay? And so what if he is? Painting your nails isn't the same as sexuality – it's just curiosity. But even if our children are gay, or trans, or non-binary, the last thing we should do is shame

them for it. We can't shame a child into being more masculine or feminine, any more than we can change who they are. And this isn't just about protecting our own kids – it's also about helping them not become the ones who unknowingly bully others for being different. Because when we have rigid norms, anyone who dares to step out of them is bullied back into line using labels. And it harms both boys and girls.

Gender norms teach children which parts of themselves – and each other – are acceptable, and which are not. Alf is only four and he's already come home with comments like 'only girls do their hair'. I had to point out that my hair stylist, Michael, is a man. It shows how early these ideas take hold. Gender norms aren't just about clothes and colours – they're social blueprints. And while none of us get it right all the time (least of all me), just being aware of what we say and do can help us raise children who feel safe being themselves.

When we police our children's interests, traits or clothes based on their gender, we don't just shape who they think they're allowed to be – we shape who they think they're allowed to value, admire and respect. We subtly teach them that 'girly' means 'less than'. And those lessons don't stay in childhood. They follow us into adulthood. It all starts here: with pink and blue. If we don't question it, we raise children who begin from their earliest days to shrink themselves – and shrink each other too.

3.

Bossy Boots

Before I even started school, I had already absorbed so many messages about what was appropriate for girls and what was exclusively for boys. But it was at school that I began to learn how labels are used to keep us in line.

I have fond memories of primary school: I remember all my teachers' names, and I remember sitting in the main hall for assembly. I even remember singing 'Morning Has Broken' at the top of my lungs while competing with another little girl called Deborah to see who could sing the loudest. I can still recall us locking eyes with each other, determined to out-sing the other.

Whether that kind of competitiveness or desire to stand out is something you see as a positive sign of confidence or not, what was abundantly clear was that adults were on a mission to stamp the volume out of me. As a five- or six-year-old, what stuck with me most was the injustice of being constantly told off for being *bossy*. Whether it was by my teachers, my mum, or someone else's mum at a party or in the playground, it was always the same. I might have been organising a game of 'mams and dads', telling other kids off for talking in class, or getting everyone to sit in a circle at my birthday party so we could play Pass the Parcel. No matter the intention, I learned very early on that everyone – especially the adults – wanted me to pipe down.