# Barbie’s shift to flat shoes mirrors changing workplace norms and women’s empowerment



Barbie, the iconic doll who has captivated the imaginations of children and adults alike for over six decades, is undergoing a notable transformation in her footwear choices. A recent study analysing nearly 3,000 Barbie dolls released from 1959 to 2024 reveals a significant shift from high-heeled designs to more practical flat-footed forms. Researchers attribute this evolution to changing workplace norms, reflecting an increasingly diverse landscape of professional opportunities for women.

The study's findings coincide with a broader societal reassessment of women's roles in the workforce. From the early days of Barbie, when her slender, high-heeled feet were a nod to the fashion norms of the 1950s—echoing the style of her predecessor, the German doll Bild Lilli—Barbie has now embraced more functional footwear. This significant change correlates with the rise of more inclusive employment policies and a wider range of careers represented within Barbieland. For instance, Barbie's transition from a fashion model to a multitude of professional roles, such as paleontologist and farmer, reflects ongoing shifts not only in consumer expectations but also in women's real-world career pathways.

Prof Cylie Williams, a podiatrist at Monash University, led the investigation after a scene in Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film prompted her and her colleagues to consider how Barbie's design had changed over the years. Historically, Barbie's foot position was remarkably fixed, with feet angled at 40 degrees for nearly three decades. However, since the early 1990s, the introduction of flat-footed models has been notable. By 2024, 60% of new Barbies were designed with their feet firmly on the ground, a change that signals not just a shift in aesthetics but in the very perceptions of femininity and professionalism.

The implications extend beyond Barbie’s wardrobe. High-heeled shoes, once a standard requirement for many women in professional settings, are increasingly viewed as impractical. A conversation surrounding this transition was brought to the forefront with the release of the Barbie movie, which also featured scenes that underscored these evolving societal norms. Footwear choices now reflect a broader understanding of comfort and practicality for women in the workplace. As noted by Dao Tunprasert, a lecturer in podiatry at the University of Brighton, the move towards practical footwear in dolls like Barbie serves as a metaphor for the liberation from rigid gender expectations in the professional sphere.

Furthermore, brands such as Birkenstock have seen a resurgence in popularity as part of this cultural shift towards comfort, claiming that their long-term sales growth correlates with modern feminist ideals and an increasing disdain for traditional high-heeled footwear. This aligns with Barbie's journey of self-actualisation, as seen in the film, where the pink Arizona sandals represent a significant pivot towards a more empowered identity.

The past decade has also marked a significant evolution in Barbie's designs, according to a spokesperson from Mattel, who claimed that the company is committed to ensuring that children can see themselves reflected in the diverse range of dolls presented. This includes a wider variety of skin tones, hair types, and indeed, foot positions.

Ultimately, the gradual shift from high heels to flat shoes within Barbie’s wardrobe encapsulates a more extensive narrative regarding women’s rights and workplace equality. Health professionals like Williams argue that rather than promoting a negative stance towards high heels, the focus should shift to those empowering choices that reflect individual needs. The conversation has moved towards celebrating versatility in women's footwear, acknowledging that, like Barbie, women can— and should—choose their attire based on the tasks ahead, free from judgment and societal constraints.

In this context, Barbie's changing footwear serves not only as a reflection of shifting fashion trends but also as a poignant reminder of the ongoing fight for gender equality and representation in all spheres of life.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: (1), (2)
2. Paragraph 2: (4), (5), (7)
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8. Paragraph 8: (1), (6)
9. Paragraph 9: (1)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2025/may/15/how-the-world-of-work-has-lured-barbie-out-of-high-heels> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2025/may/15/how-the-world-of-work-has-lured-barbie-out-of-high-heels> - An analysis of nearly 3,000 Barbie dolls released over 65 years reveals a shift from high-heeled to flat-footed designs, reflecting changing workplace norms and career opportunities for women. The study, led by podiatrists in Australia and the UK, found that from 1990 onwards, flat-footed models became more prevalent, coinciding with Barbie's diverse professional roles. The authors suggest that this trend mirrors evolving employment patterns and social policies in 'Barbieland'.
3. <https://www.axios.com/2023/09/14/birkenstock-feminism-barbie-sales> - Birkenstock attributes its long-term sales growth to modern feminism, noting a societal shift away from high heels towards comfortable footwear. This trend is highlighted by the 'Barbie' movie, where pink Arizona sandals symbolize Barbie's transformation into a self-actualized woman. The brand has gained mainstream popularity by adapting to fashion trends and collaborating with renowned designers.
4. <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-04-17/why-does-barbie-walk-on-her-tip-toes.html> - The article explores the origins of Barbie's tiptoe stance, tracing it back to her predecessor, the German doll Bild Lilli, whose slanted feet were inspired by 1950s fashion trends. Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, designed the doll with high-heeled feet to reflect contemporary aesthetics. Over time, Barbie's design evolved, and in 2015, Mattel introduced dolls with adjustable ankles to accommodate flat shoes.
5. <https://www.straitstimes.com/life/what-makes-barbie-barbie> - Barbie's iconic tiptoe stance, designed to fit high-heeled shoes, has been a defining feature since her debut. The article discusses how this design choice has influenced perceptions of femininity and the evolution of the doll's footwear. It also touches upon the 2015 introduction of dolls with adjustable ankles, allowing for flat shoes, signaling a shift towards more inclusive representations of women.
6. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10728597/> - A study analyzing 86 female Barbie dolls in medical and science careers found that over half wore high-heeled shoes, despite the impracticality for professional settings. The research highlights the disconnect between the doll's attire and real-world professional dress codes, emphasizing the need for more accurate representations in children's toys to reflect safety and practicality in professional environments.
7. <https://www.aol.com/news/one-barbies-first-designers-walks-214724543.html> - An interview with one of Barbie's first designers discusses the doll's evolution from a 19-year-old fashion model to a more inclusive figure. The designer highlights the introduction of diverse characters, such as the first Black Barbie in 1980, and the adaptation of Barbie's design to reflect changing societal norms, including the shift from high-heeled to flat-footed dolls.