

Chess' First Move in Gender Equality:

PIECING TOGETHER A MORE UNIFIED COMMUNITY



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Over winter break, I had an interesting conversation with my grandfather about women in the workplace. I was employed at the time and, after telling my grandfather what my job consisted of, he made an off-handed remark that it was a shame women had to work nowadays. As someone who is an intense workaholic and needs to be constantly busy, I reacted in the only way I could: utter horror. The idea of not being employed in some way is unimaginable to me.

When I asked my grandfather to elaborate on his position that women should not work, he shrugged, made a “back in my day” comment and said that I should find a husband who will work for me.

This conversation understandably bothered me. Although my grandfather did not imply that women are incapable of working, his comment insinuated that women are less valuable in the workforce than men. Yes, he grew up in a different time, but I come from a family of strong women. My great-grandmother worked until she was in her 80s, my grandmother just recently retired and my mother is, as far as I am concerned, a superhero since she worked and raised three children, two of whom were twins, at the same time.

For me, the topic of women working is a resolved one. I worked throughout high school and college to pay my own tuition. I have done everything from food service to machine operating to writing consultations. I cannot quite wrap my head around the idea that people still believe women need to prove their worth before they receive the same awards and respect that men do.

As a woman, I have grown up hearing typical phrases such as “you hit like a girl” or “man up.” Essentially, the English language is saturated with lines that imply that being a girl is not good enough, and that masculinity is the standard. This is especially prevalent not only in the workforce, but also in activities that foster competition, such as athletics or chess.

Due to the recent media attention that chess, a game I enjoy playing recreationally, has been receiving, I want to look at gender disparities in professional chess. It seems like everyone has now watched or heard of Netflix's show “The Queen's Gambit.” In this series, the protagonist

Beth Harmon is a chess prodigy in the 1960s who navigates the world of competitive chess as a woman. The eyes of the world are on her: expecting her to fail, surprised when she succeeds.

Several female chess players have commented on how Beth's story closely relates to their own struggle as women experiencing sexism in chess. Grandmaster (GM) Judit Polgar, the only woman to be ranked in the Top 10 of chess or play for the World Championship, said in a New York Times interview that the show gave her “a sense of déjà vu.” It did a good job of showing the struggles that women face in competitive chess, however Polgar also named one inaccuracy of the show: the support Beth received from her male peers.

Many accounts from women in chess detail the way men in the sport mitigate their accomplishments. Susan Polgar, Judit's older sister, is quoted saying, “When men lose against me, they always have a headache...or things of that kind. I have never beaten a completely healthy man!” Chess is an example of how, frequently, the ability and accomplishments of women in competitions are cheapened. If a woman beats a male competitor, it is common that he claims it is an anomaly, something out of the ordinary. This subordination of women perpetuates the assumption that women do not have the mental capacity to play chess—or any intellectual, aggressive games—well.

According to Dorsa Derakhshani, a Women's GM, International Master (IM) and member of Saint Louis University's chess team, science is one of the best arguments against those who claim women are biologically disadvantaged in chess. Over the years, there have been an alarming number of male GMs who have stated women are inferior to men in chess, including famous players such as Bobby Fischer, Nigel Short and Garry Kasparov.

Additionally, having been a member of both the Iranian and the U.S. Chess Federations, Derakhshani confirmed that sexism in chess is not confined to one part of the world; rather, discrimination against female players stretches internationally and is ingrained in chess culture.

A controversial example of the separation of genders in chess are titles. To be honest, it is difficult for me, as well as people outside of the chess world, to really understand how chess titles and rating work. In extremely basic terms, there are two different categories of titles that can be won in chess: standard World Chess Federation (FIDE) titles that any player can win and women's titles. The highest FIDE title that can be achieved, aside from World Champion, is that of Grandmaster (GM). However, the title of Women's GM (WGM) is of similar rating to the lower

title of International Master (IM). Essentially, the highest title exclusively for women is lower than the second highest standard title.

Like many women chess players, Derakhshani has mixed feelings about women's titles. She believes they are a good way to encourage girls to begin and continue playing chess, however they can create a psychological barrier for women players.

The latter is supported by GM Irina Krush who, like the Polgar sisters, intentionally did not use her WGM title after earning her IM. On women's titles, Krush states, "I don't see their benefit. Women's titles are really a marker of lower expectations." Krush, like other women players, chose to further her chess career by pursuing the highest title in the game: GM. Through bypassing the women's tournaments, she was able to play higher ranked players and therefore increase her own FIDE ranking. Krush has written that she believes participating in solely women's tournaments discourages women from pursuing a GM title, as it seeks to satisfy them with the lower ranked WGM.

It is argued that the separate titles can reduce the confidence of players and affect their overall performance, which leads to the ultimate question of whether the reason chess is so male dominated is because of nature or nurture. The idea that women are less intellectually talented than men is absurd. There is no evidence to suggest that men are biologically more intellectually talented. The more plausible explanation is that these pervasive beliefs that women do not belong in competitive environments affect the confidence women have in their own abilities and, as Krush states, confidence affects performance.

Women face many subconscious and institutional barriers to equality. From old-fashioned ideas like my grandfather's to the separation of genders in competitive sports like chess, the toxic belief that women somehow have less to contribute than men is perpetrated. Though I have never played chess outside of a recreational setting, hearing anyone insinuate that my accomplishments are a result of chance would be both insulting and discouraging.

It is disheartening to know that gender inequality is so starkly present in one of the world's most respected games. Many of the biases present in chess are a result of misinformation: the belief that women are intellectually inferior in competitive settings is feeding into cycle of gender

discrimination.

But in the grand scheme of American society, do chess titles really matter? I would say yes because, just like anything, it is not just the titles. The separate competitions and level of recognition of women chess players represents not only an international but a national subordination of women. We live in a world where the sexist belief that anything associated with women, even "playing like a girl," is an insult in recreation, the workplace and our personal lives. The devaluation of a WGM is yet another way to exploit and subordinate women and their accomplishments.

In the United States, women encompass nearly half of the workforce. In addition, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 76% of teachers in the U.S. are women. Women are the greatest source of education in the country. Why, then, is there any doubt concerning our intellectual abilities? Why is it a bad thing to "play like a girl" if women are the backbone of our workforce and education system?

There is a common saying that behind every great man is a great woman. This phrase is meant to be empowering, but I have never liked it much. It always bothers me that women are seen as a support: that no matter how talented you are as a woman, you are just a side character in someone else's success. You are the headache they had to lose against.

This is where the change should begin. Stereotype that subordinate women perpetuate the assumption that women do not have the mental capacity to work for themselves, play chess or engage in any intellectual behavior. The idea that men are biologically superior needs to be taken out of circulation—and chess should be the first move.

Change starts with children; Young girls should be taught to be confident and empowered and that they are just as capable as their male peers—whether on the board or off. In competitive environments like chess and the workplace, women should be given the same opportunities to succeed; their accomplishments should not be brushed off or reduced to coincidence.

Just like the queen on a chess board, women are powerful. We are educators and fighters. Society is built on the backs of women lifting others up; it is time society returned the favor and bridge the gender gap. Or, at least, put sexism in check.

FIDE Titles		
Title	Minimum Required FIDE Elo	Eligibility
Grandmaster (GM)	2500	Anyone
International Master (IM)	2400	Anyone
Woman Grandmaster (WGM)	2300	Women only
FIDE Master (FM)	2300	Anyone
Woman International Master (WIM)	2200	Women only
Candidate Master (CM)	2200	Anyone
Woman FIDE Master (WFM)	2100	Women only
Woman Candidate Master (WCM)	2000	Women only