

# GIRLS' CHESS, WOMEN'S CHESS, GENDER EQUALITY, FEMINISM

DEUTSCH: „MÄDCHENSCHACH, FRAUENSCHACH, GENDERGERECHTIGKEIT, FEMINISMUS“

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The German chess federations want to increase the number of girls and women in chess. In what way can it be realised? Researchers have done a lot of research on gender differences and similarities in chess in recent years. Where do chess players stand in the gender discussion? What distinguishes chess from other sports?

**Keywords:** chess, Feminism, gender equality, girls' chess, women's chess, sport

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## CHESS AN EQUAL SPORT FOR ALL

Anyone can learn chess, regardless of age and gender. The state of health plays a subordinate role in popular chess. In other words, chess provides the best conditions for men and women, girls and boys to play together on equal terms.

Chess players know from experience that there are hardly any barriers in chess. This experience that chess is an equal sport is confirmed by the Spanish researcher José Ramón Trillo in his presentation at the International Education Congress 2021 in Spain [1], which had the focus "Pedagogical insights that improve the world". Both sexes can participate equally in chess because the conditions are the same for all. Hormones, above all testosterone, and age have no influence on chess success, unlike in the more physical sports such as weightlifting, wrestling, rugby, water polo. Chess is basically an equal sport that has an integrative effect and strengthens self-confidence. In addition, it has a positive influence on social behaviour, motivation to learn and the ability to concentrate. This underlines the great role which chess can play in society. In other countries, chess is seen as an attribute of all-round personal development.

The above-mentioned conference paper by José Ramón Trillo [1] gives good arguments to the chess practitioner, because what he knew from experience as a chess player is now substantiated with reference to research results and brought to consciousness. For the German translation please follow the [Link](#).

## PERCEPTION OF CLEVERNESS AND BRILLIANCE IN CHILDHOOD

The 2017 study by Andrei Cimpian together with other colleagues [2] supports the idea that role models play an important role for children. "The stereotypes associating men but not women with brilliance and genius may take a toll on women's careers; fields whose members place a great deal of value on sheer brilliance (e.g., mathematics, physics, philosophy) have lower proportions of women earning bachelor's and doctoral degrees." [2]

"The results suggest that children's ideas about brilliance exhibit rapid changes over the period from ages 5 to 7. At 5, boys and girls associated brilliance with their own gender to a similar extent." [2] Girls aged 6 and 7 were significantly less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender. "Thus, the "brilliance = males" stereotype may be familiar to, and endorsed by, children as young as 6. The stereotype associating females with being nice seems to follow a similar developmental trajectory." [2]

The researchers conclude that young children's emerging ideas about who is likely to be brilliant influence what games and pursuits they engage in. The Modesty norms dictate that one should not brag about intelligence and brilliance. "Modesty norms dictate that a woman should not boast about her own smarts, whereas we asked children to judge whether other people were smart." [2]

Under the impression of the results of the researchers just mentioned, I took a closer inspection of the chess tournament that has been taking place for 11 years and is only open to primary school pupils in the region. In recent years, between 80 and 110 primary school pupils have taken part in the tournament.

*Table 1: Proportion of girls on the podium (1st to 3rd place) in the overall field of participants in the primary school chess tournament. Girls and boys played together in one group, i.e., in their respective grade level. For information: The award ceremony was held separately for girls and boys.*

Primary school tournament	Year 2022	Year 2019	Year 2018	Year 2017	Year 2016	Year 2015	Year 2014	Year 2013	Year 2012	Year 2011	Year 2010	Total
Total number of podium places	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	132
of them girls	6	1	2	1	1	0	1	2	1	0	2	17
of them boys	6	11	10	11	11	12	11	10	11	12	10	115
Share of girls in the total number of podium places in %	50,00	8,33	16,67	8,33	8,33	0	8,33	16,67	8,33	0	16,67	12,88
Share of girls in the total number of participants in %	32,14	24,54	22,35	16,67	11,83	22,78	21,67	12,66	20,00	14,75	12,36	19,25

How are the results to be evaluated? In the percentage comparison of the placings achieved, the girls always do worse than would be expected according to the percentage of participants. Future tournaments will show how 2022, after a 2-year pandemic break, is to be evaluated. The field of participants includes pupils who regularly play in the school chess club and pupils who also train in the club. It is possible that the reasons for the "weaker" performance are to be found elsewhere, for example because the girls show less self-confidence and ambition than the boys, have less chess knowledge, are more nervous, ...

Overview and statistics on the chess tournament of the Vogtlandkreis primary schools from 2010 to 2022: [Grundschulturnier-Statistiken](#) ,(Vogtlandkreis is situated in West Saxony, Germany)

## OTHER POSSIBLE REASONS WHY FEWER GIRLS THAN BOYS PLAY CHESS

Because, as just explained, chess is not a typical male or female sport, there must be other reasons why the female gender is underrepresented in chess. A significant correlation between the age at which chess was started, participation in tournaments and school team membership was found in a Turkish study [3]. The younger the age at which chess is started, the higher the participation in tournaments and playing in the school team. Since sporting successes are additionally motivating, they arouse ambition in the children, spur them on to additional occupation with chess problems and lead to longer-lasting club membership.

Access to chess in public spaces also plays a role. Since internet trade is booming and inner-city trade is thinning out as a result, there are fewer toy shops and bookshops. Not all toy shops offer chess sets any more. It will be praised that many game collections include the chess game. The willing parents who have no connection to a chess club face the next challenge in their search for chess literature suitable for children, because the local bookstore only has chess literature on its shelves in a few cases. At large Internet shopping portals, one can find a vast amount of chess literature, but how can these parents find out which chess textbook actually understands the child, inspires him and leads to the first successes?

Other problems that are familiar from everyday school life and that are also complained about in other sports are the time factor and joint family activities. There are quite a few parents who overdo it in their efforts to do the best for their child. The children have a busy week (e.g. Mon - dancing, Tues - music school, Wed - football, Thurs - chess, Fri - swimming) with little free time to do things on a whim. Many a weekend is booked up with performances and competitions. To be successful at something, you need extra activity in your free time and also free time to just stare holes in the air, which psychologists say is important for developing creativity. Children want to show acquired knowledge and skills, but if parents hardly have time or don't take the time, then this also has a detrimental effect on the hobby, chess.

Despite intensive research, there is so far no very robust explanation as to why more boys than girls play chess. In his book "The Psychology of Chess" (2019), Fernand Gobet offers various explanations for the gender difference, such as biological reasons, socio-cultural reasons, psychoanalytical reasons or motivational reasons. To him, motivational reasons seem very plausible, i.e., chess-playing women often have many other interests such as a recognised occupation, friends and family. The women not only say this in interviews, their curricula vitae also confirm it.

## PREJUDICE THAT MEN ARE SMARTER THAN WOMEN

**Important:** Studies have now shown that no gender can claim to be smarter or more intelligent. A later article will be devoted to this.

One obstacle could be the persistent prejudice that men are smarter than women. Is that really the case?

The egocentric chess world champion Bobby Fischer once made scathing remarks about women in chess:

*„They're all weak, all women. They're stupid compared to men. They shouldn't play chess, you know. They're like beginners.“*

In 1990, the charismatic world chess champion Garri Kasparov had few words of appreciation for women's chess, although he acknowledged Judit Polgar's talent:

*„It's inevitable that nature will work against her, and very soon. She has fantastic chess talent, but she is, after all, a woman. It all comes down to the imperfections of the feminine psyche. No woman can sustain a prolonged battle. She's fighting a habit of centuries and centuries and centuries, from the beginning of the world. She will be a great grand master, but she will never be a great grand master.“* [\[4\]](#)

The resounding slap in the face for Garri Kasparov followed in 2002. "Judit Polgar needed 42 moves and the great Kasparov gave up" was the headline in the press worldwide. This historic game was played on 08.09.2002 in the match "Russia against the rest of the world". Chessbase.de has published this chess game with English comments. Kommentaren [veröffentlicht](#).

In an interview in 2008, Garri Kasparov paid his full respect to women in chess:

*"Women can think just as strategically and logically as men. Judith Polgar is a good example of that. True, it is still unique that a woman makes it into the top ten. But it's only a question of time before women are right at the top." [\[5\]](#)*

The Russian poet Alexander Pushkin sees it quite differently:

*„Thank you, my soulmate, that you are learning to play chess. It is a must for any well-organized family.“* (1832, in a letter to his wife).

The prejudice that men can think better than women has a long lasting effect, even if we are not always aware of it. There are many indications that the feminine gender is not always able to live out its interests and hobbies to the same extent as the masculine gender. In short, boys often have better conditions, both in the school and home environment, to be successful in chess. This brings us to the sore point of "socialisation" and how it affects sporting success in chess.

## SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF GIRLS AND WOMEN IN CHESS

To begin with, a little test: Within 2 minutes, write in a two-column table on the left the names of known world-class female chess players and on the right the names of known world-class male chess players. I am convinced that there will be more men's names than women's names on the paper.

Due to the low percentage of women, more men than women are active in the youth development. The trainer shows games of the grandmasters with the children, has them solve tactics problems from real games or discusses chess studies. Now they look at the role models used for the exercises: How often are they chess players and female chess players? Even though there is no official study on this, experience shows that mostly game examples are presented by male chess players. Reasons could be carelessness, lack of impressive game examples by women or the time needed for research. Adrian Iqbal [6], who does a lot of research on aesthetics and beauty in chess, found in 2015 that games between female players are of lower aesthetic quality than games between male players. Perhaps men have a better aesthetic sense of the game and therefore appreciate it more. This could explain why there are significantly fewer female composers of chess problems. Adrian Iqbal does not rule out that future research will come to different conclusions, because new technologies expand the research possibilities and because there are too few published chess compositions by women.

That's exactly where every club and trainer can begin - by presenting games and studies by women in a well-directed way. In this way, the training leaders can, quite simply and without bending over backwards, get the girls excited about chess, strengthen the girls' self-confidence and subtly influence more girls and women to play chess. Girls remain loyal to chess longer if there is at least one other girl in the training group. The more girls, the better.

There are role models for strong women in chess, but who can give interesting facts and stories without thinking too long?

**Judit Polgar** became the youngest grandmaster of all time at the age of 15 and broke Bobby Fischer's record. In 2014 her record was entered into the Guinness Book of Records: "The longest time a female player has been consecutively ranked chess world number one is 25 years and 1 month and was achieved by Judit Polgar" That's what the official certificate of the Guinness organisation reads. [Link to Chessbase](#)

**Chaudé de Silans** qualified several times for the final round of the French singles championship (she remained the only woman to do so for years)  
Link zu [Wikipedia](#) or [Stuttgarter Schachfreunden](#) (the latter in German)

**Vera Menchik** was the first Women's World Chess Champion. „....Vera was encountering misogyny and discrimination in the male dominated world of chess. Many men ridiculed her and the Viennese master Albert Becker, at the start of one tournament in 1929, mockingly proposed that any male player whom Menchik defeated in tournament play should be granted membership of the Vera Menchik Club. However, the last laugh was on Becker, when he became the first member of the club, followed by dozens of the world's top male players. Vera would not be cowed by all this ridicule and, prior to one tournament, she declared that she was looking forward "to drinking some men's blood." The reader can find out more about her life via the [Link](#)

David Smerdon misst Vorbildern eine große Bedeutung bei, um Kinder, vor allem Mädchen bei der Stange zu halten und sie zu Leistungen zu motivieren. In seinem Vortrag bei der FIDE in 2022 [7]

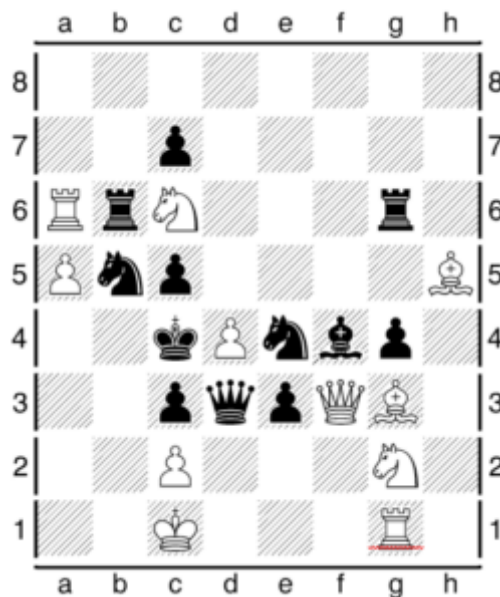
zeigte er, dass die in Frankreich eingeführte Frauenquote erfolgreich war. Offen ist, ob dies auch in anderen Ländern der Fall wäre. Weiterhin schlägt er für die Verbände vor, behutsam Quoten in den Ligen einzuführen. Hilfreich könnte seiner Meinung nach auch ein regelmäßiges Treffen talentierter Mädchen mit Schachidolen sein. Die talentierten Jungen würden dies sicherlich auch als Motivations-schub wünschen.

David Smerdon attaches great importance to role models in order to keep children, especially girls, in line and motivate them to perform. In his presentation at FIDE in 2022 [7], he showed that the women's quota introduced in France was successful. It is open whether this would also be the case in other countries. Furthermore, he suggests for the federations to sanftly introduce quotas in the leagues. In his opinion, a regular meeting of talented girls with chess idols could also be helpful. The talented boys would certainly also want this as a motivational boost.

The feminine gender is said to have a greater sense of beauty and aesthetics. Why not serve this stereotype? There are wonderful chessographic chess tasks that create a fantastic world of images on the chessboard.

Here are some examples:

The Barker



*"Whoever starts mates the opponent's king in four moves."*

A fine example of a dog has been immortalised on the chessboard. The artwork is entitled "The Barker",. Not so, "dogs that bark don't bite" This little dog is a loyal servant to his master and proves to be extraordinarily aggressive: four sharp barks and the opponent is down. Who will be the quickest to find the solutions?

The author of the above chess study **Ellen Gilbert** (1837-1900) was a strong American chess player called the "Queen of Chess". Ellen Gilbert showed bite at the time when it was still customary for women and men to meet in separate chess clubs. She founded the "Hartford Chess Club" in her hometown of Hartford, where chess players of both genders met. In correspondence chess she demonstrated her outstanding analytical skills several times. In the correspondence chess tournament of

1878, for example, she announced that she would mate her opponent once in 23 moves and the other time in 35 moves. Whether Ellen Gilbert was a great dog lover is not known.

More information about the "Queen of Chess": [Link](#)

Solution to the above chess study "The Barker": [Link](#)

Who knows the name **Edith Elina Helen Baird**?

Edith Elina Helen Baird (1859 - 1924) was an English chess composer. She was the world's most productive composer of chess problems. She created over 2000 chess problems. Her compositions received many awards.

Your heart's desires be with you!  
As. I. 2. 211.

'Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,  
.....

Love's gentle spring doth always fresh  
remain,

Venus. 799

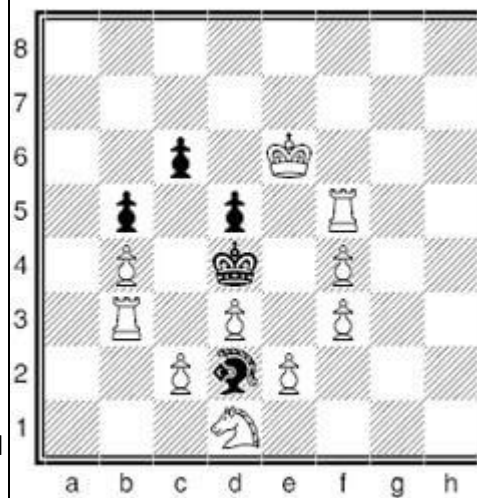
Where love is great, the littlest doubts are  
fear;  
Where little fears grow great, great love  
grows there.  
HAM. III. 2. 181

O cunning Love! with tears thou keep'st  
me blind,  
Lest eyes well-seeing thy foul faults should  
find.  
SONN. 148. 13.

To be wise and love exceeds man's might.  
TROIL. III. 2. 162.

(Quotations from the works of Shake-  
speare)

„The Heart“ (The Illustrated London  
News)



Mate in 2 moves

For information about the chess study see siehe [\[8\]](#)

Solution to the chess study "The Heart" above: [Link](#)

The contribution is intended to stimulate reflection, discussion and the search for ideas. The ultimate solution will not exist. That is why the exchange of experiences between coaches, trainers, pedagogues and scientists is important.

#### ARTICLES ON "GIRLS IN CHESS" WORTH READING:

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- Sean Ingle (29.11.2021) "It is not biology": Women's chess hindered by low numbers and sexism. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/nov/29/womens-chess-sexism-misogyny>

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