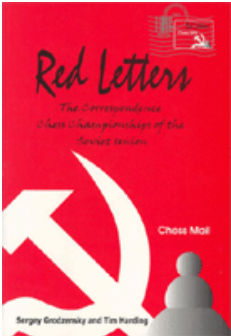




COLUMNISTS

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Tim Harding



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Women and Chess: the Debate is Revived

Three of my columns four years ago dealt with the topic of women’s chess. Kibitzer 109 ([June 2005](#)) asked why the Queens of Chess were not deadlier than the male. The following two Kibitzers described the first women’s international tournament, played in London in 1895. This month I am returning to the topic in response to a debate about it which has been started on the ChessBase [website](#). As the deadline for delivering this column was 3 July, the article cannot take account of any reader responses posted there after 2 July.

The debate at ChessBase began on 20 June when they posted an article entitled “Women and men in chess – smashing the stereotypes”. It was co-written by two Russians, 24-year-old FIDE women’s grandmaster Natalia Pogonina and her husband Peter Zhdanov, with whom she is apparently writing a book to be called *Chess Kamasutra*. (Is that going to be the answer to Jennifer Shahade’s *Chess Bitch*?) He is described as “a successful IT-specialist, leading world debate expert, top blogger and a proficient chess player.” (Isn’t it hard to take “top blogger” seriously! The other “qualifications” seem highly relative too. But Natalia’s credentials are impressive, with a FIDE rating over 2500 – comparable with male GMs – and an impressive list of tournament wins.)



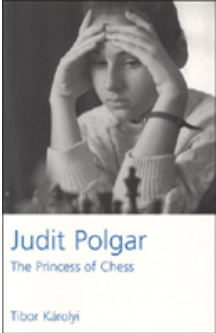
Natalia Pogonina

In their article Pogonina and Zhdanov kick off with an epigraph, Bobby Fischer’s notorious statement to *Harper’s Magazine* in 1962:

“They’re all weak, all women. They’re stupid compared to men. They shouldn’t play chess, you know. They’re like beginners. They lose every single game against a man. There isn’t a woman player in the world I can’t give knight-odds to and still beat.”

It is doubtful whether he could have made good that boast but of course he never had to; he never played the top women players during his career. Even in 1962 there was certainly one female player at least to whom Fischer could not have given knight odds successfully, but in those days there may not have been many others; it is quite different now. In that year Nona Gaprindashvili from Georgia won the Women’s World Championship from the title-holder Elisaveta Bykova by 7-0 with four draws, a margin of victory which tends to half-support his claim. Gaprindashvili was the strongest female player since Vera Menchik, who had been killed by a V1 flying bomb in London in 1944, and she soon proved herself capable of playing consistently against men at a strong IM level, eventually becoming a GM.

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Nona Gaprindashvili

Nona Gaprindashvili – Raymond Keene

Goglidze Memorial, Tbilisi, 1974

Pirc Defence [B09]

1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 g6 4 f4 Bg7 5 Nf3 c5 6 Bb5+ Bd7 7 e5 Ng4 8 h3

This move was not mentioned in Botterill and Keene’s 1973 book *The Pirc Defence*. It was introduced into master play by GM Ljubojevic in the 1972 Skopje Olympiad as an improvement on the lines given there.

8...cxd4

Another plan is for Black to play ...Bxb5 at move eight or nine.

9 Qxd4 dxe5 10 Qd5! e4 11 Ng5 Nh6 12 Ngxe4

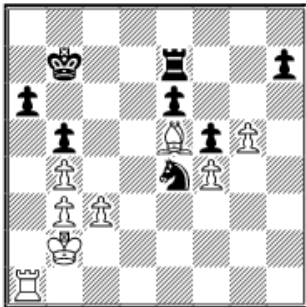
12 Qxb7 had been played in Kurajica-Keene, Wijk aan Zee 1974.

12...Nc6 13 Nc5 a6 14 Ba4 b5 15 Bb3 e6 16 Qxd7+ Qxd7 17 Nxd7 Kxd7



This position is “perhaps very slightly better for White” according to John Nunn in *The Ultimate Pirc*.

18 g4 Nd4 19 Be3 Nxb3 20 axb3 Kc6 21 0–0–0 f5 22 Ne2 Rhe8 23 Bd4 Bf8 24 Be5 Bc5 25 Nd4+ Bxd4 26 Rxd4 Rad8 27 Rxd8 Rxd8 28 Bg7 Nf7 29 Re1 Kd5 30 Bf6 Rd7 31 g5 Rb7 32 b4 Ra7 33 b3 Ra8 34 Kb2 Re8 35 h4 Nd6 36 Rd1+ Kc6 37 h5 gxh5 38 Rh1 Ne4 39 Be5 Re7 40 Rxh5 Kd5 41 Rh1 Kc6 42 Ra1 Kb7 43 Rd1 Kc8 44 Ra1 Kb7 45 c3



By now, the game had presumably been adjourned and continued in a second session as was the practice in those days. White has targets for her rook on both wing, so that although the knight is not badly placed, the bishop is usually the preferable minor piece when there is play across the board.

45...Nf2

This is the start of a dubious plan by which the knight’s position is worsened.

46 Kc2 Ng4 47 Bd4 Nh2 48 Bc5 Rd7 49 Re1 Nf3 50 Rxe6 Rd2+ 51 Kc1 Rh2 52 Rb6+ Kc7 53 Rxa6 Nd2 54 Be3 Ne4

54...Nxb3+ 55 Kd1 leaves the knight embarrassed, although not immediately lost.

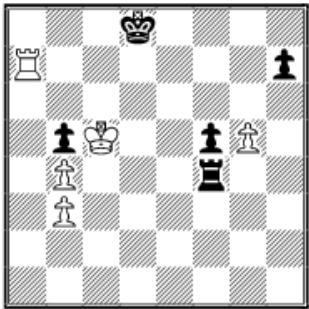
55 Bd4 Rh1+ 56 Kc2 Rh2+ 57 Kc1 Rh1+ 58 Kc2 Rh2+ 59 Kd3

After a repetition, White decides to play for a win. As time controls would have been at moves forty and fifty-six, this could now be a third session of play but I don't know the actual circumstances.

59...Rh3+ 60 Be3!

In order to play for a win, White has to go into the rook ending where her active king position will be the decisive factor.

60...Nxc3 61 Kxc3 Rxe3+ 62 Kd4 Re4+ 63 Kc5 Rxf4 64 Ra7+ Kd8



65 Kxb5!?

This creates two passed b-pawns, but the endgame is not a clear win after this rather slow move. White could also have played to promote the g-pawn instead, in combination with mating threats: 65 Rxh7 Rg4 66 Kd6 Kc8 (66...Ke8 67 Ke6 Re4+ 68 Kf6 f4 69 g6) 67 Rg7 Rxb4 (67...f4 68 Rc7+ Kb8 69 Rc5) 68 Rf7 Rxb3 69 g6 Rg3 70 g7.

65...Rg4 66 Rg7 f4 67 Kc6 f3

This looks like the losing move. 67...Ke8 must be better, to prevent White's next, and preserve drawing chances.

68 Rf7 Rxb4

68...Rxc3 69 b5 Rg6+ 70 Kb7 followed by b6 should win.

69 Rxf3

Now White has a fairly standard winning position with two pawns against one and an outside passed pawn.

69...Ke7

69...Rg4 70 Rf8+ Ke7 71 Rh8 Rxc3 72 Rxh7+ Kd8 73 Rh8+ Ke7 74 b4 wins as the black king is cut off.

70 Re3+ Kd8

If he goes the other way, then Kc5 and the b-pawn advances. Now White will win with the other pawn instead.

71 Rd3+ Kc8 72 Rd7 Rxb3 73 Rxh7 Kd8 74 g6 Rg3 75 Rd7+ Ke8 76 g7

Now the black king cannot reach the queening square and White's last task is to support the final step to promotion.

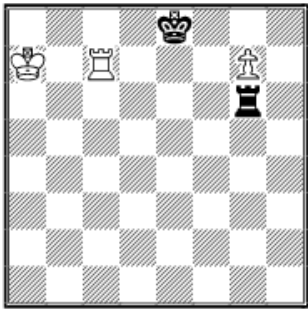
76...Rg6+ 77 Kc7 Rg1 78 Kc8 Rg2

If 78...Rc1+ 79 Kb7! Rb1+ 80 Kc6!, and as the white rook can never be captured when the black rook is absent from the g-file, White's king gradually works around to the kingside.

79 Rc7 Rg1 80 Kb8 Rg6

If 80...Kd8? 81 g8Q+ Rxc8 82 Rc8+ etc.

81 Ka7



Threatening again the slow king walk to the kingside. Black now either makes a slip or decides he has seen enough and it all comes to an abrupt end.

81...Kd8

But the alternative is to let the white king cross on to the sixth rank and the open fields: 81...Rg1 82 Kb6 etc.

82 Rf7 1-0

Black resigns as White will check and promote, though it would have been possible to set one last trap: 82...Rg1 when on 83 Rf8+? Kc7 it's a draw, because if 84 g8Q?? Ra1+ 85 Qa2 Rxa2 mate. The correct reply is 83 Kb6! and Black soon loses his rook.



Maia Chiburdanidze

Gaprindashvili was the inspiration for the new generation of women chess players led by Maia Chiburdanidze who raised the general standard of women's chess considerably. Chiburdanidze was clearly “unisex” GM-standard from an early age and her leading Georgian and Russian contemporaries were at least IM standard.

Chiburdanidze had a much more dynamic style than her predecessor and was not afraid to “mix it” in sharp complex positions, displaying her ability to out-calculate male grandmasters and win games even from objectively lost positions. Here are two examples which probably would not feature in her “best games” collection but are revealing of her talent and fearless approach to tournament chess, which was to be replicated by Judit Polgar, in particular, later.

Maia Chiburdanidze (2400) – Vladimir Tukmakov (2560)

USSR First League Tashkent, 1980

Najdorf Sicilian [B96]

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Bg5 e6 7 f4 Qc7 8 Qf3 b5 9 0–0–0 b4 10 e5 Bb7 11 Qh3 dxe5



12 fxe5!?

Nunn recommended 12 Ncb5 axb5 13 fxe5 Nfd7 14 Nxe6 Qb6 15 Nd4 in one of his Najdorf books.

12...Qxe5 13 Bxf6 Qxf6!?

13...gxf6 has more often been played; e.g., 14 Bb5+ axb5 15 Rhe1 Qf4+ 16 Kb1 Ra6 17 Ncxb5 Bd5 18 Nb3 Bxb3 19 axb3 Rc6 20 Qd3 Be7 21 Re4 Qg5 0–1, A. Korolev-I. Kopylov, 18th USSR Corr. Ch 1988.

14 Ncb5



14...Bc5?!

This loses. Instead,
a) 14...axb5 15 Bxb5+ and now
a1) 15...Ke7? 16 Qg3 Nd7 was played in J. Ferrar-L. Yudasin, Canada open, Calgary 1996; Black eventually won, but in this position White failed to find 17 Nf5+! Qxf5 18 Rxd7+ Kf6 19 Rf1 which should win.
a2) 15...Nc6! is possibly playable; e.g., 16 Nxc6 Qg5+ or 16 Bxc6+ Bxc6 17 Nxc6 Qf4+.
b) 14...Qg5+ 15 Kb1 axb5 16 Bxb5+ Ke7 17 Rhf1 Bd5 18 Nf5+ is another unclear variation.
c) 14...Qf4+ 15 Kb1 Bd5 (15...axb5? 16 Nxe6) 16 c4 bxc3 may be best, leaving White a pawn down without any obvious forcing line.

15 Nxe6!

Maybe Black expected 15 Nc7+ which is unclear.

15...axb5 16 Bxb5+!

Decisive.

16...Nc6 17 Bxc6+ Bxc6 18 Nc7+ Kf8 19 Nxa8 Qf4+ 20 Kb1 Qb8 21 Rhf1 Be7 22 Qe6 1–0

GM Tukmakov outranked his opponent by 160 Elo points at this time.

Maia Chiburdanidze (2355) – Nigel Short (2510)
Dortmund 1983
Caro-Kann Defence [B16]

1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 Nd2 dxe4 4 Nxe4 Nf6 5 Nxf6+ gxf6 6 Be2 Qc7

An aggressive waiting move. 6...Bf5 is more normal, but this alternative prepares the following pin as well as queenside castling and lurking threats to h2.

7 Nf3 Bg4 8 c4 e6 9 0–0 Nd7 10 d5!?

Probably unsound.

10...0–0–0 11 dxe6

This line had been seen a few times, as in one of GM Flohr’s games from 1951, but this appears to be a novelty.

11...Ne5 12 Nd2 Bxe6 13 Qa4 Rg8 14 Ne4?

14 Qxa7 was perhaps best, since after 14...Bh3 15 g3 Bxf1, although Black has won the exchange, White has some definite compensation; 14 Kh1 is the “safe” move, conceding Black some initiative however.

14...Bxc4!



Ouch! But now Chiburdanidze. instead of collapsing, really starts to play against the future world championship challenger.

15 Bh5!

She finds the best practical chance in an objectively lost position. If 15 Bxc4?? Nf3+ 16 Kh1 Qxh2 mate, while if 15 Nxf6 Rg6 and Black wins material.

15...Bxf1 16 Kxf1 Nd3 17 Qxa7 Qe5 18 Be3

Already the exchange down and with two pieces en prise, White must play aggressively.

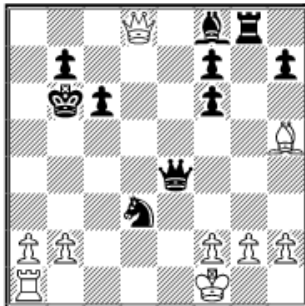
18...Qxe4!?

Short takes up the challenge. 18...Be7 was perhaps the wiser alternative.

19 Qa8+ Kc7 20 Bb6+!

Evidently the only chance.

20...Kxb6 21 Qxd8+



21...Kc5

This move was given a ‘?’ in *British Chess Magazine* for June 1983. Instead 21...Ka7 22 Qa5+ Kb8 23 Qd8+ is an immediate draw by perpetual check.

21...Kb5!? is the only winning try, though there is no room for miscalculations. After the forced 22 Bf3, Black must move his bishop, discovering a counter-attack on the white queen; e.g., 22...Bb4 (Perhaps the best of the available squares; 22...Bc5 23 Qd7 is unclear.) 23 Qxg8 Qd4 24 Bxc6+ Kxc6 25 Qc8+ or Qe8+, followed by the queen getting back to defend f2. Black stands better but may not have a forced win.

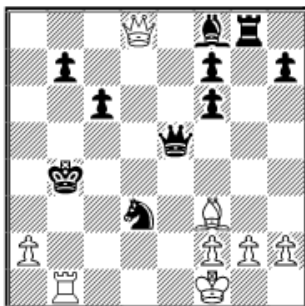
22 b4+!

Suddenly, matters are not so clear. Apparently Black cannot avoid a draw.

22...Kxb4 23 Bf3 Qe5

23...Qc4 is also possible.

24 Rb1+



24...Nb2??

Immediately disastrous although *BCM* did not draw attention to this blunder. 24...Kc4 may still draw: 25 Qb6 Qd4 26 Qb3+ Kc5 27 Qb6+ etc.

25 Qd2+

Now Black is lost.

25...Ka3 26 Rxb2 b5

Now, according to Fritz, 27 Rb1 mates the quickest, but the move Chiburdanidze finds is quite adequate.

27 Rb3+ Ka4 28 Bd1! 1–0

These players who rose in the 1970s in turn were to be surpassed by the

Polgar sisters and their successors. As I pointed out in my earlier article, the 1987 book by John Graham, *Women in Chess: Players of the Modern Age*, was partly out of date even when it appeared, because it had been written a few years earlier and didn't mention the early successes of Zsuzsa Polgar which had already happened by then. What these developments did clearly show was that the master-strength female players developed in concentrations, in specific places where there was specific encouragement for female players rather than the prejudice against them that tended to operate elsewhere. The "hothousing" which operated in the Polgar household is just the extreme end of a spectrum. They are a phenomenon comparable with the Williams sisters in tennis, or perhaps with the mathematician Ruth Lawrence and other female prodigies in other fields. Their careers do not prove that this is the only way to produce female chess-players who can compete with the top men; it is not a way that is likely to be copied often, and perhaps the Polgar parents would have done the same experiment if some or all of their children had been boys.



The Polgar Sisters

Judit Polgar was not interested in becoming Women's World Champion; she left that to elder sister Zsuzsa. She was able to beat male world champions. Pogonina and Zhdanov's article includes a game in which Judit beat Kasparov in the Russia vs. The Rest of the World match, Moscow 2002. To which I add, she would have beaten him on another occasion also if he had not cheated by taking taken a move back after letting go of the piece, as reported in *New In Chess*.

Also here is a game she won earlier in her career in a match against an ex-world champion. By this time she had the higher rating (2595 versus 2565) and she was to become, in 1996, the first woman to have a rating in the world top ten.

Judit Polgar – Boris Spassky

2nd match game, Budapest 1993

Ruy Lopez [C95]

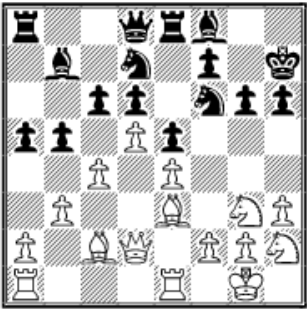
1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 0-0 Be7 6 Re1 b5 7 Bb3 0-0 8 c3 d6 9 h3 Nb8 10 d4 Nbd7 11 Nbd2 Bb7 12 Bc2 Re8 13 Nf1 Bf8 14 Ng3 g6 15 b3

Prepared specially with her second Lev Psakhis for this match. 15 a4 was the usual move.

15...Bg7 16 d5 Bf8!?

To defend the d6-pawn in preparation for ...c7-c6.

17 Bg5 h6 18 Be3 c6 19 c4 a5 20 Qd2 Kh7 21 Nh2



21...b4?!

Maybe too slow. There are several possible alternatives.

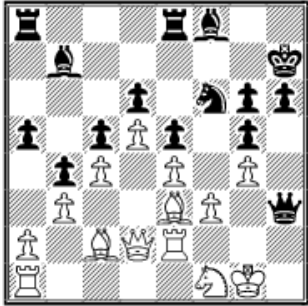
22 Ng4 Nxc4 23 hxc4 Qh4?

Ftacnik's notes for ChessBase explained that this move was directed against White's plan of 24 f3, 25 Kf2, 26 Rh1 but it failed to take account of White's alternative idea to take advantage of the exposed black queen position.

24 g5! c5?! 25 Nf1! f6 26 g3 Qh3 27 f3 fxg5 28 Re2 Nf6

Preparing a retreat for the queen, so Polgar repeats the theme of move twenty-five and closes the diagonal.

29 g4!



29...Qxf3

Clearly forced but White now gains tempi.

30 Nh2 Qh3

Not 30...Qg3+ 31 Rg2 Qh3 32 Rf1 and wins.

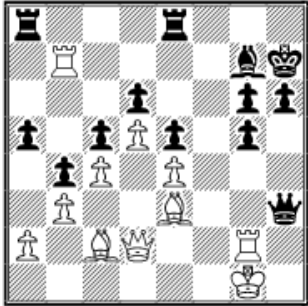
31 Rf1 Nxg4 32 Rf7+ Bg7

If 32...Kg8 33 Rxb7 Nxe3 34 Rxe3 Qc8 35 Rb6 h5 36 Rg3 g4 37 Qg5 Kh7 38 Nxg4! wins (Ftacnik).

33 Nxg4 Qxg4+ 34 Rg2 Qh3

It is too late to retreat: 34...Qc8 35 Bxg5.

35 Rxb7



White has won a bishop for three pawns, retaining the attack.

35...Rf8?

Ftacnik suggested 35...Kg8 as the lesser evil, but White wins by 36 Bxg5! hxg5 37 Qxg5 (threatening Rxg7+) 37...Qh6 38 Qxh6 Bxh6 39 Rxg6+ etc. Or if 36...Rab8 37 Rc7 Rec8 38 Rxc8+ Rxc8 39 Bd1 and Bg4, bringing the last piece into the attack.

36 Bxg5! hxg5 37 Qxg5

Not 37 Rh2?? Rf1 mate!

37...Qh6 38 Qxh6+

Avoiding the final trap 38 Rh2 Rf1+ 39 Kxf1 Qxh2

38...Kxh6 39 Rh2+ Kg5 40 Rxg7 Rf3 1-0

Spassky lost on time making his fortieth move in this hopeless position.

In [Kibitzer 109](#), I listed ten (overlapping) types of explanation that have been offered for why women on the whole are far less successful at chess than men.

To summarise

- a) Their brains work differently, and male brains are better at a type of reasoning needed for chess, while women’s brains are better at other things;
- b) Women’s hormones make them less aggressive and less consistent performers in competition;
- c) They don’t have an Oedipal desire to kill the king;
- d) Most females just don’t see the point;
- e) Child-bearing and child-rearing holds them back;

- f) Daughters aren't given the same early introduction and training as sons;
- g) Girls didn't have female chess role models;
- h) Female-only events limit the ambition of potential stars;
- i) Women were historically debarred from the clubs and chess resorts;
- j) Professional chess was considered an unsuitable occupation for a woman.

Pogonina and Zhdanov's case

The Russian writers mention some but not all of these points. They express their points differently also.

Point a (brain differences) has been central to the ChessBase debate so I leave that until later in the discussion. Point b (hormones) is half-discussed. Testosterone (or lack of it) is mentioned, but not whether women's monthly cycles affect consistency. Shahade's book has also been criticised for refusing to admit that there may be some genuine biological factors in female underperformance.

Pogonina and Zhdanov advance a very weak point that is demolished by one of their critics. They claim that the lower percentage of grandmaster draws among women players proves "that women's fighting spirits are definitely higher", but Paul Lillebo, a self-confessed 1800 player from Asheville, North Carolina, points out that typically lower-rated players draw far fewer games.

Point c (the Freudian pseudo-explanation offered by Reuben Fine and Ernest Jones) does not seem to be taken seriously by anyone nowadays, and rightly so.

Pogonina and Zhdanov also mention briefly that women may not be interested and are more held back by family commitments than men. They basically argue that there is no objective reason why women should underperform men, but certain factors hold them back. This is hardly new territory. They consider psychology to be the most important factor, saying:

"A stereotype exists in chess that women are no match for men. It is based on statistical data. That's why many female players are taught from early childhood that they'll never make it to men's level. TV and books are also trying to convince them that it's unreal..."

I don't really recall such TV and books but maybe this is a Russian thing?

I played nearly all the top women players of England and Ireland in my most active OTB period, the late 1960s and the 1970s. Maybe two or three were a little defeatist when I obtained superior positions and did not make the most of their defensive chances. Certainly two or three missed wins against me, but then who does not miss wins sometimes in complex tactical situations with the clock ticking.

Most of the female opponents I have had over the years (some of whom drew with me) were very determined to do their best and if I usually won the games it was thanks to greater technical knowledge and experience of how to play in critical tournament situations rather than any deficiency in them. I only had one opponent who was clearly taking advice from her husband (an international player) during the game, forcing me to answer her moves almost instantly to stop her getting up from the board at the critical moments.

If anything, the one clear difference when I was playing female opponents was that I played with even more determination because they were women than I might against a male opponent of the same rating. If other male players are like me, then this is a disadvantage they were constantly having to overcome. So in that case it would not be female psychology making the difference but male!

As role models, the Polgar's have inspired greater female participation, both numerically and in terms of high performance level, worldwide. They reinforced the case of those who always argued that male domination of chess in the past was the result of social restrictions, cultural conditioning, and the lack of opportunities for women to compete on equal terms with men. Pogonina and Zhdanov don't cite Poulain de la Barre's famous aphorism "the mind has no sex" but that is basically their viewpoint.

Most recently, many theorists have debated whether there are genuine differences between female and male brains that could lead to different aptitudes. These differences might explain the variation in chess performance in some degree, like the difference that physiologists have discovered between different speed of "twitch" in leg muscles that may help determine who will be a fast sprinter and who will be better fitted for long-distance running. I am unwilling to accept such types of "discovery"

as all-embracing explanations for gender variation in chess, yet several of the comments appeared to accept this as proven. In my opinion, it is premature to speculate on the outcome of such research, still in its relative infancy, especially as future generations may judge any conclusions in the same light that previous “scientific” assumptions about sex differentiation are seen today.

Left-wing historian Jennifer Hargreaves, in her book *Sporting Females* (1994), expressed succinctly what may now be called the accepted view on the question of women and sport in the nineteenth century: “The Victorians maximized cultural differences between the sexes and used biological explanations to justify them”. She showed that biology was used firstly to construct social ideas about gender and secondly to defend inequalities. For example, in the nineteenth century it was widely accepted among doctors and many other supposedly intelligent men that both too much physical activity and too much education was bad for girls.

This belief stemmed from three ‘scientific’ principles that are nowadays considered disproved: firstly, the idea that acquired characteristics were inherited; secondly, that humans had a finite amount of ‘vital force’, which therefore needed to be directed wisely; and thirdly, that women’s reproductive and nervous systems were connected in a way that men’s were not. (For more details, see the article by Paul Atkinson in Sara Delamont & Lorna Duffin (eds.), *The nineteenth-century woman*.) Such prejudices underlay a notorious article by Henry Maudsley on ‘Sex in Mind and in Education’, in the *Fortnightly Review* (1874), which was refuted by pioneering doctor Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in the same volume of that periodical.

What I found surprising in reading the reactions to their article in the [supplementary page](#) posted on 30 June was a readiness among today’s male chess players attacked their approach. One complained of “the same old myths of the 70s about men and women really being just the same, so that any apparent differences between them must be explained by different upbringing and influences. This was hogwash in the 70’s and it’s hogwash now”. As the above shows, this kind of debate has been going on since the 1870s, not just the 1970s.

In my opinion, what we are seeing in some of the comments made in the ChessBase responses is just a backlash against feminists. One commentator claimed to be “scientific” but the only “scientific” attitude to take to this question is we don’t know enough yet, and digging up old prejudices is not likely to be helpful.

Probably, for a wide variety of reasons including those mentioned, we shall never see nearly as many women as men at the apex of the chess pyramid. The possibility of there being a female world champion one day, however, cannot be ruled out. Judit Polgar got as close as, for example, Rubinstein, Geller and Gligoric, who could beat any of their contemporaries on their day although they never had a direct shot at the world title.

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