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Chess and Identity: How Can Feminism Influence Chess?

Chess is an incredibly international pastime. The top twenty-five women chess players represent twelve countries,including players from China, India, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. The board game brings people across the world to compete in a variety of tournaments throughout the year, whether open or closed, high-rated or low-rated. Tournament locations span across continents and participation does not discriminate against one's country of origin. However, gender bias in competitive chess is a strange beast. Historically, women have struggled in the male-dominated world of chess, and that struggle still exists to this day. Male chess players outnumber female chess players at all age levels and in the majority of tournaments. Most of the stories and news that comes out about the game, for those who follow, deals with the whims of the top male players. The chess world often leaves women in the background. Many of the top tournaments that are followed are invite-only, where men receive all of the invites. Chess is split into the open category, women's category, and junior's category. The open category is entirely male-dominated; only one woman, Judith Polgar, has achieved a top ten place worldwide in the open category. These disparities exemplify how women have their own struggles within the world of chess and face barriers to entry that men do not face.

However, women have also been a powerful force in many areas, and chess is not an exception. Over time, women have made incredible progress in chess, and their struggles

represent larger gender issues in the workplace rather than incompetence or lack of interest. This essay will explore the identities of women and how it connects them to chess culture. Being a woman changes one's place in the world of chess; the exclusion she faces is related to historical and societal gender biases. Feminist insights about intersectionality can help explain the underrepresentation of women in professional chess today. Specifically, I'll be looking into how the women's category in chess provides them with an environment and identity in the face of sexism. I believe that feminist philosophy is important to consider in the world of chess, and I'll be discussing the theories of Crenshaw's intersectionality in relation to women in chess. This paper will act as a general introduction to gender and chess.

It's important to note that the gender divide in chess is a multifaceted issue that reflects broader societal structures and challenges around gender equity. Many competitive sports rely on strength, but as a board game, chess instead requires incredible intellect and mental stamina. Competitive players must be able to sit at the board to calculate lines for hours on end, as a classical game of chess provides 180 minutes of play time between players. As mentioned previously, despite how the open category is open to all genders, it is exclusively dominated by male players. Historically, access to chess clubs, tournaments, and training has been made easier for young men, and young women often lacked similar chances. Additionally, social norms in many cultures have not supported women's intellect in the same way boys have been supported. Because of this, fewer women engage in the sport as children in any serious manner while their male counterparts often receive better assistance. The dropout rate among girls in chess is high, and fewer girls being present at the beginning phases of chess training leads to fewer women being present at the higher levels. They don't see a world where chess can be a part of their identity.

In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she discusses how women are seen as "the other" and are oftentimes oppressed because of their characterization from men (de Beauvoir, 2015). Men are seen as the primary subject of the chess world, and women are considered an unnecessary component. Even though gender superiority has no bases in biology, especially when considering intellect, men have created a historical construct that incorrectly qualifies them as superior to women. de Beauvoir uses a multitude of arguments to defend her position, and her works ring true in the realm of chess. Human nature is not fixed at birth but is developed over time and changed by circumstances (Haseley, 2020). Those circumstances are often social and economic, and in the case of chess, men have developed a circumstance that causes women to be excluded as an 'other' group in chess society. The division of chess is a mirror of the divisions that de Beauvoir discusses in her books, and her understanding of gender divisions can give us a better feeling for the divisions we see in chess. Women have been seen as a non-essential element of the chess world, and in the modern day, a solution needs to be found.

The women's category was made in reference to this issue. The theory behind a women's category is to provide an area where women can compete with peers of the same gender, without being pit against a gender that has dominated the chess world. It provides them with a sense of connection to others who are similar to them and who have faced the same challenges that they have. To have a women's category is to have a category dedicated to a group that historically faced every challenge in order to find success. It can provide women with a source of community and it can act as a way to support their efforts in a unique manner. It can act as a source of identity. The women's category includes its own set of titles (for example, the Women Grandmaster (or WGM) exists as a non-mutual counterpart to the Grandmaster title), and many women are happy to hold these titles because they act as a sign of their skill and identity. Women

can pursue both open titles and women's category titles, providing them more options to compete at the level that they deserve to. Additionally, research has shown that female chess players may make more errors against male opponents, which can indicate that the stereotypes and separation surrounding women in chess cause them to perform worse, even if their skills are the same (Sanchez-Pages, 2022). Providing women with a separate category can support them against the negative stereotypes of the main chess world.

Chess is not immune to sexism. There is biased media coverage even to this day (Root, 2019). Reports of the most recent leg of the entirely male player Fischer Random Chess tournament dominated the public conversation instead of the women's world chess championship, which both occurred in early April. While some media platforms such as Chess.com provide great commentary of all chess competitions, even newer platforms such as Take Take Take were entirely focused on other (male-centric) tournaments. Many women report unwelcoming or even hostile environments in the chess world (Svensen, 2023). Prominent chess figures have made sexist comments, forcing outdated ideas about gender and intelligence (Dewitt, 2023). These are barriers that can discourage women from continuing in the sport. There has been a historical exclusion and structural inequalities that play a role in this. Addressing this divide requires more than just inviting women to play; it demands reshaping how chess is taught, promoted, and discussed at every level. Fostering an inclusive environment from childhood onward and challenging stereotypes about gender and intellect are essential steps toward narrowing the gap and unlocking the full potential of all players, regardless of gender. The women's category, by existing, is providing women with a way to identify themselves. It makes a statement about themselves: that these players are women who have not been shut out from the chess world despite their gender. They succeed while being women.

However, not every woman participates in the women's category. Judit Polgár is one example of a figure, who is generally considered the strongest female player in history. However, she often refused to participate in women-only tournaments, instead preferring to compete in male-domnated open tournaments (Root, 2019). Her success challenges the notion that women cannot compete at the highest levels, but she remains one of the only women to experience her level of success. de Beauvoir discussed how women are often seen as inferior and other; Polgár's method of addressing this though confronting the issue head-on. Yet, Polgár is an interesting case because even if her work is not tied to her role in the women's category, she acts as an inspirational figure for women who want to enter the field of chess. She still acts as a figure who is successful in chess, and her status as a woman still matters, even if she chooses to not show it through women's competitions.

Now that the distinction of sex-based categories has been addressed, I want to discuss how an understanding of chess and sex can act as intersectional to an individual identity. Feminist philosopher and advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw has a theory of intersectionality that may allow us to understand how a number of aspects in a person's identity can intersect to give them a unique experience of the world. Overlapping systems of oppression, alongside systems that cause unnecessary discrimination based on features such as sex, are something that impact an individual's experience in the world (Crenshaw, 1991). While originally Crenshaw coined the term for bias against black women, it has become used as a broader term for how individuals are subjected to multiple problems (such as the gender problem or the class problem) concurrently (Columbia Law School, 2017). If one is to apply this framework to chess, it allows us to understand gender discrimination in chess in another way, alongside other compounding factors.

In some countries, cultural attitudes toward gender and chess differ significantly. Within the past few months, discussion among chess players about differences and nationality sparked. Certain Grandmasters have expressed his dislike of how America handles chess training in their youth. In many other countries, chess players receive support with their careers, and this can be seen in the rankings. Every month, the International Chess Federation (often shortened to FIDE, often treated as the governing body of chess) publishes a chart of the best players in each category based on their Elo scores. Most commonly, players from countries across Asia and Europe will dominate the charts. While there are many successful top-ranked male players from the United States, there are none in the women's category until rank 34. Women in chess already face the struggles of their gender, and this is complicated by the lack of assistance their countries support. Being a woman can impact your chess career, and so can your country of origin, and these identities can intersect in a practical way when looking at resource access for chess players. Being a woman in a country without support means that you exist in a world where there is less support for your work. Depending on a woman's country of origin, her efforts will be treated differently; audiences may assume she was a natural talent if she comes from certain countries and dismiss her real efforts. Even if chess is an incredibly diverse scene, it does not take away the violence of the world and the limitations placed on women. Chess is not merit-based but depends on structural and political factors alongside how gender and nationality communicate. Crenshaw's arguments about the struggles that intersectional women face rings true here.

Additionally, not all women face discrimination in the same way. Socioeconomic status can play an important role, for example, as women in lower-income families face additional challenges to accessing the money for tournament fees, practice time, and travel costs to be competitive. Chess is a game that requires a massive amount of training from a young age, and if

individuals lack an educational environment, they may struggle to keep up competitively with their peers. This may be confounded by their location and country or origin. Without support, women may struggle and fall behind. The limitations that women face cannot be thought of as a sole product of their gender, because it has become intertwined with their country, their nationality, and their socioeconomic status. Thinking about women in chess and addressing their issues cannot be done by only viewing their gender or nationality, because there are other issues at play.

Part of the reason why the women's category in chess exists is to mitigate these issues. If chess has its own area for women to compete in, they can be supported in an underrepresented field. Many arguments have been made surrounding the existence of a women's category. For example, chess is not a physical sport, and individuals may argue that in theory, there is no reason why women shouldn't be able compete equally alongside men. Furthermore, the women's category includes its own set of titles, but the WGM title has a lower rating requirement than its GM counterpart in the open category, potentially signaling that women can be held to a lower expectation. Women are allowed to compete in either category, so why create the divide?

Providing women with their own category acts as a way to address the systematic biases against them. Having women-exclusive titles provide additional stepping stones for female players to advance further into the competition in an area that has historically excluded them. Without systematic support, relying on women to compete in the open category creates access issues for them. A women's category can provide individuals with more scholarship opportunities, more attention, and more institutional support for those who play in the category. Even when women can compete on the same level as men and succeed, this category creates a sense of equity and can provide women with an opportunity not previously handed to them.

Additionally, it can provide women with a sense of identity and connection to the world. To be a woman in chess is to be a woman who has overcome barriers. To be a woman is to have defied barriers. Even though the open category is available to individuals of all genders, there are societal and cultural sources that have historically pushed women out. To have a women's category is to have proof that women can compete. It is to address the historical barriers that women face in order to try and provide one more solution. Additionally, being a woman in chess means that you defied the struggles of your gender and your nationality, and the lack of access to resources that you may have faced, in order to show that you can represent yourself alongside individuals similar to you. It does not fix the pervasive sexism that exists in the chess world at all levels, but it offers women a sense of community. It gives women a chance.

A women's category cannot change the intersectionality behind their country of origin or socioeconomic status, and it cannot promise every young girl the chance to compete worldwide. However, it can take a step forward to provide a space where women are supported and seen. Their intersectionality has space in these areas; it provides women an area where they are discriminated against for one less thing. In creating a women's category, it provides women with a space to engage with the game, and it provides a new context to show the work women must do to compete. Despite the feelings of resentment around a women's category in chess and the belief that it sets an incorrect standard for them, it provides individuals with a community and an identity.

In the modern age of the internet, there are many women chess players who are doing an excellent job at promoting chess and being incredible role models for women who want to play chess. Chess commentators such as Dina Belenkaya, Anna and Alexandria Botez, Nemo Zhou, and Anna Cramling make the sport more accessible to women and create content for a wide

audience. Meanwhile, figures such as Pia Cramling, Koneru Humpy, and Ju Wenjun represent modern-day successful women in chess. Not every aspect is fair yet: at the World Rapids and Blitz Championship in December 2024, both male GM Ian Nepomniachtchi and female GM Zhu Jiner were fined because, according to FIDE, their shoes broke dress code, but Zhu's dress code fine was unfounded while Neopomniachtchi's was (Svensen, 2025). She bore the burden of writing an open letter to FIDE; she was the one to poetically and publicly argue with the governing bodies of chess while male players like Magnus Carlsen (another individual fined for dress code violations at this event) could make worse statements without the advocacy that Zhu promoted. Women and chess are powerful and essential, and their work is not unfinished. However, they have a category and a connection to each other, and an identity that transcends the problems of the chess community.

My goal, in writing this essay, was to briefly examine how women have historically struggled in the chess world. More importantly I wanted to show how the women's category contributes to a sense of connection and identity. A women's category helps support women in chess, especially given the intersectionality that comes with nationality and socioeconomic status that may disadvantage them. Feminist theory impacts everyone and shows in all areas of life; its intersection in a sport that I love is incredibly apparent.

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