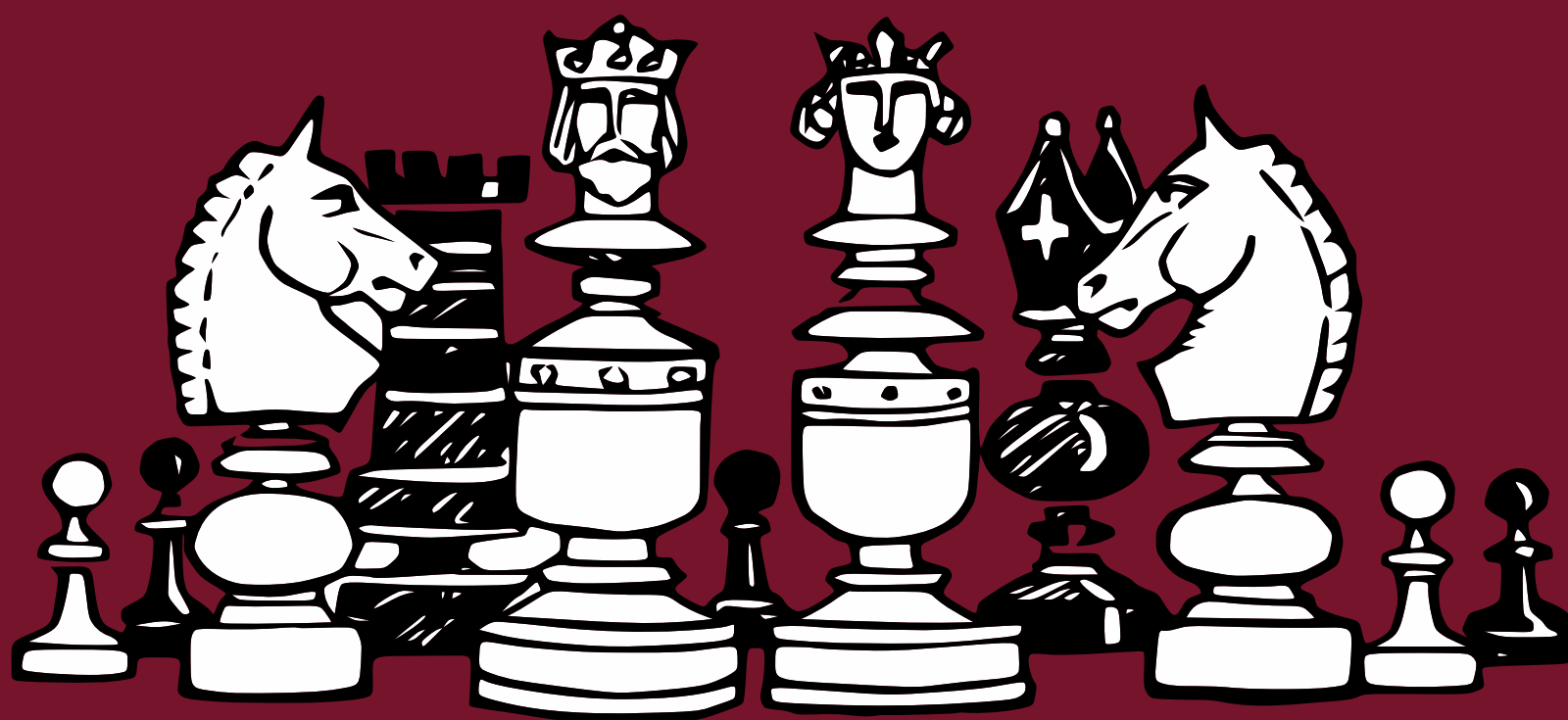


Female identity in chess



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Chess is much more than a simple game: it represents a true discipline of logic, strategy, and intelligence. Every move requires planning ability, foresight and critical analysis, making it a stimulating and complex mental exercise.

Although chess is an activity open to everyone, there is a widespread perception that it is a “male” environment, largely dominated by professional men and historically prominent champions. However, this view is reductive and does not reflect the real evolution of the game. Over time, many women have approached this discipline and left a significant mark on it; it is important to recognize their impact and their growing presence in the field.

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• HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF CHESS

For centuries, the history of chess almost completely ignored the presence of women. This absence does not reflect a lack of talent, but rather the **systematic exclusion of women** from cultural and competitive life. The scarcity of written sources between the 7th and 12th centuries, a crucial period for the spread of the game, further contributes to this fragmented picture.

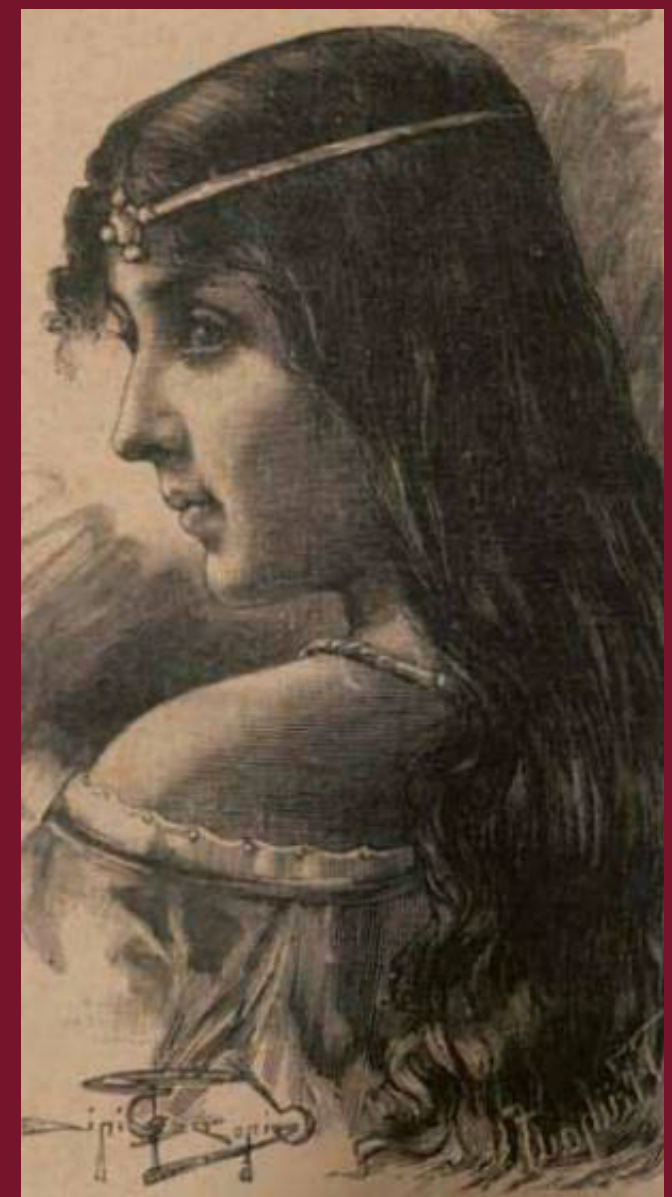
The first reference to a woman connected to chess does not concern the game as played, but its material representation. *Margaret the Adroit*, an Irish sculptor, is



traditionally associated with the creation of the famous “**Lewis Chessmen**”, one of the most important historical artifacts in the history of European chess.

In the 13th century, a female figure of great interest emerges: *Macalda of Scaletta*, a Sicilian baroness involved in political intrigues and imprisoned for conspiracy. During her imprisonment, she learned the game of chess from *Margam ibn Sebir*, who recognized her talent. Considering that at that time the game was not yet widely spread in Europe, Macalda may have been **one of the first women, if not the very first, to play chess**.

With the gradual spread of the game across the European continent, chess became a popular pastime among the aristocratic classes and also involved women. However, female participation remained confined to the private sphere for many centuries.



Portrait of Macalda of Scaletta by Gino De' Bini, 1889

Access to official competitions was in fact denied to women until the late 19th century. A significant turning point came in 1884, when the Sussex Chess Association organized the **first women's chess tournament**. This event paved the way for the **first international women's tournament**, held in 1897, marking an important step in the recognition of women's competitive chess, even though such events continued to receive far less attention than men's competitions.

With the advent of the 20th century, the world of chess underwent profound changes. In particular, in 1927 the FIDE organized the **first Women's World Chess Championship**, won by *Vera Menchik*, a student of the grandmaster *Géza Maróczy*.



Photograph of the participants of the first international women's tournament in 1897 in London

Menchik dominated the chess scene for over a decade, becoming a symbol of female excellence in chess.

Later, in 1950, FIDE officially introduced the **title of Woman International Master**, which was awarded for the first time to *Ljudmila Rudenko*. Seven years later, in 1957, the **first Women's Chess Olympiad** was held and won by the Soviet team, confirming the rising technical level of female players.

A particularly significant moment occurred when Indian player *Rohini Khadilkar* **took part in the Indian Men's Championship**, sparking intense debate. Thanks to a ruling by the Supreme Court, she was allowed to compete, while FIDE reaffirmed the principle of non-exclusion of women from national and international tournaments. In this context, the recognition of the **Grandmaster title without gender distinction** also took shape: the first woman to achieve it was *Nona Gaprindashvili* in 1978.

In the 1990s, *Judit Polgár* definitively redefined the role of women in chess.

Considered the strongest female player of all time, she became **the youngest Grandmaster in history** and, in 2002, **defeated World Champion Garry Kasparov**. Finally, in 2005, she reached **8th place in the overall world rankings**, demonstrating that **chess talent is not a matter of gender**.



• THE RELEVANCE OF WOMEN'S CHESS TODAY

The landscape of contemporary women's chess shows clear progress, but it continues to reveal deep contradictions. Despite decades of inclusion policies, women **still represent only a minority** of players globally, accounting for around **16%** of participants. This disparity is not due to a lack of talent but stems from a system that has historically excluded women and continues to disadvantage them today through less media visibility, lower prize money, and limited access to top-level tournaments. Women's competitions, while essential for ensuring participation, are **often treated as secondary** to mixed events, reinforcing a separation that risks entrenching inequality rather than overcoming it. Although some elite female players have proven they can compete at the absolute highest levels, the chess world still struggles to create truly equal conditions, making gender parity more of an aspirational statement than an actual reality.



Thanks to the advanced search function available on the [official FIDE ratings and rankings portal](#), the following chart presents the collected data on the **number of male and female players**, broken down **by country and birth decade** (values M and F).

At the same time, the **male-to-female ratios (M/F) have been calculated for each group**.

Despite this, the analysis highlights several significant long-term trends, as well as **sharp differences between countries**. There has been a **steady increase in the total number of players** registered with FIDE, accompanied by a **gradual narrowing of the M/F ratio**. This trend bodes well for the possibility that, over the coming decades, the number of female players may increasingly approach that of male players.

	1941-1950			1951-1960			1961-1970			1971-1980			1981-1990			1991-2000			2001-2010			2011-2020		
Country	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F
Armenia	27	2	13.50	71	6	11.83	50	6	8.33	94	13	7.23	173	42	4.12	447	92	4.86	891	163	5.47	259	48	5.40
Azerbaijan	49	0	-	96	6	16.00	81	9	9.00	155	29	5.34	262	59	4.44	711	191	3.72	2888	786	3.67	1506	522	2.89
China	16	0	-	16	2	8.00	76	34	2.24	142	57	2.49	322	162	1.99	510	210	2.43	1810	614	2.95	901	332	2.71
Czechia	1198	24	49.92	1701	31	54.87	1827	74	24.69	2051	98	20.93	1508	114	13.23	2086	232	8.99	4023	630	6.39	985	239	4.12
England	591	18	32.83	1182	21	56.29	1447	50	28.94	1272	72	17.67	1229	81	15.17	1687	136	12.40	3632	525	6.92	1719	361	4.76
France	2612	212	12.32	5428	467	11.62	7063	646	10.93	7271	853	8.52	6907	941	7.34	13799	2076	6.65	26003	5379	4.83	16770	4692	3.57
Germany	3186	99	32.18	5888	177	33.27	9016	417	21.62	4743	393	12.07	4512	479	9.42	6659	875	7.61	6991	1335	5.24	1312	391	3.36
Hungary	803	15	53.53	1152	29	39.72	1073	56	19.16	1145	93	12.31	1172	166	7.06	2040	442	4.62	2605	695	3.75	614	214	2.87
India	583	19	30.68	1843	53	34.77	3572	169	21.14	6839	463	14.77	10651	837	12.73	25056	3702	6.77	46632	12122	3.85	18192	5826	3.12
Israel	412	8	51.50	456	18	25.33	453	30	15.10	710	37	19.19	644	26	24.77	922	65	14.18	2443	212	11.52	908	91	9.98
Netherlands	984	16	61.50	1830	32	57.19	1903	65	29.28	1200	48	25.00	1135	86	13.20	1305	137	9.53	1162	160	7.26	240	49	4.90
Norway	353	3	117.67	565	12	47.08	1015	41	24.76	1275	55	23.18	1153	85	13.56	1340	102	13.14	2029	182	11.15	502	50	10.04
Poland	877	39	22.49	1762	98	17.98	2001	122	16.40	3187	300	10.62	3936	583	6.75	6290	1223	5.14	13852	3266	4.24	5172	1530	3.38
Romania	309	8	38.63	592	23	25.74	714	46	15.52	944	62	15.23	856	126	6.79	1281	325	3.94	4201	1303	3.22	1823	637	2.86
Russia	3832	270	14.19	5482	331	16.56	4257	450	9.46	5328	658	8.10	8684	1306	6.65	10078	2888	3.49	42191	11559	3.65	16572	4929	3.36
Serbia	1112	28	39.71	1976	32	61.75	1685	82	20.55	1136	74	15.35	954	111	8.59	1530	307	4.98	2201	531	4.15	689	233	2.96
Spain	1948	83	23.47	4842	179	27.05	8388	318	26.38	9096	449	20.26	5841	536	10.90	9729	1323	7.35	18436	3269	5.64	10313	2158	4.78
Ukraine	877	22	39.86	1226	45	27.24	1040	73	14.25	1394	137	10.18	1881	258	7.29	1952	384	5.08	5633	1185	4.75	1966	421	4.67
USA	1162	23	50.52	2646	67	39.49	2244	75	29.92	2121	132	16.07	3227	166	19.44	4840	417	11.61	5611	923	6.08	1541	388	3.97
Uzbekistan	52	2	26.00	139	6	23.17	109	7	15.57	146	12	12.17	201	48	4.19	304	100	3.04	1315	375	3.51	563	159	3.54

• THE BEST FEMALE CHESS PLAYERS

Throughout the history of chess, some female players have left an indelible mark, decisively contributing to strengthening women’s standing in a field traditionally dominated by men.

Among the many pioneers, five figures stand out for their achievements, longevity, and cultural impact.

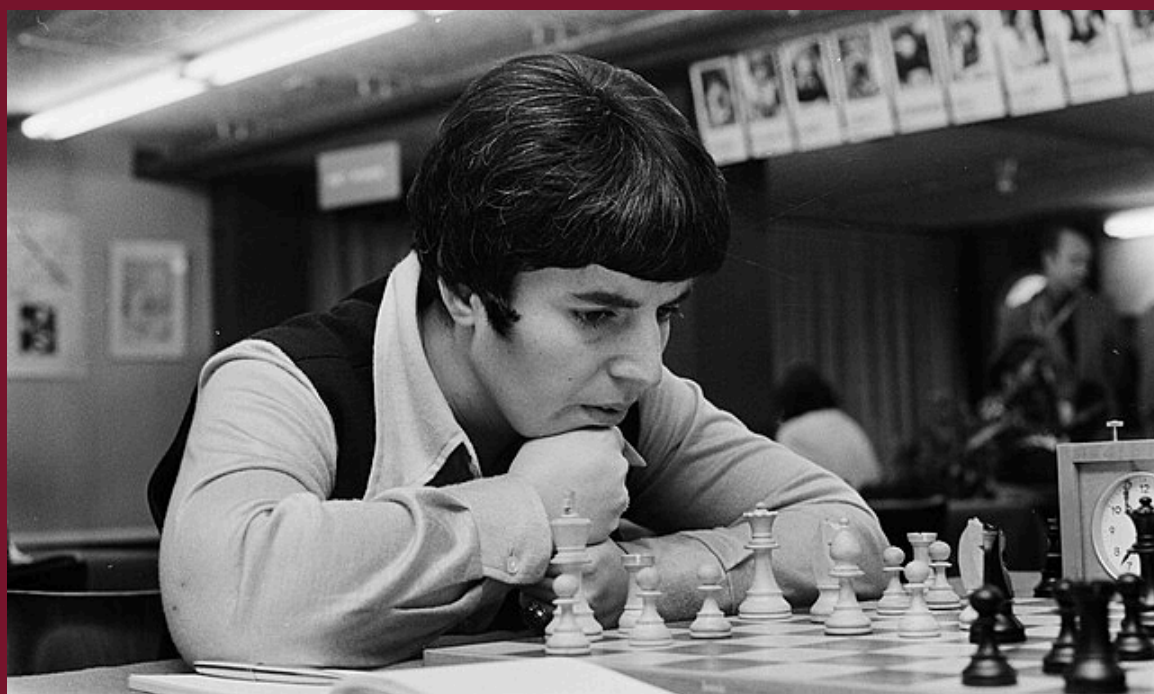
1. *Vera Menchik*: She was the first Women’s World Chess Champion and a true pioneer of women’s chess. She competed in seven World Championships, winning 78 out of 83 games, an extraordinary success rate. Her dominance and courage in facing male opponents paved the way for future generations.



Even today, her legacy is celebrated at the Women’s Chess Olympiads, where the winning team is awarded the **Vera Menchik Cup**.

2. *Nona Gaprindashvili*: She was the first woman to earn the title of Grandmaster in 1978, a milestone that crowned an already exceptional career.

The year before, she had made a stunning impression on the chess world with a brilliant performance at the Lone Pine tournament, where she finished first place, tied with several top grandmasters of the time.



She was Women's World Chess Champion for sixteen consecutive years and continued to compete at the highest level even in her later years, winning the World Senior Championship title in 1995 and the Over 65 title in 2019;

3. *Maia Chiburdanidze*: She became Women's World Chess Champion at just 17 years old, snatching the title from Gaprindashvili and becoming the youngest champion in history at the time. Her Olympic career is unparalleled: she competed in 15 Chess Olympiads between 1978 and 2008, seven with the Soviet Union and eight with Georgia. She always defended the first board, maintaining this top role even in the years when Gaprindashvili remained a direct and formidable rival, until 1994.



4. *Hou Yifan*: She claimed the Women's World Chess Championship at just 16 years old, surpassing Chiburdanidze's record for precocity. She won the World Championship multiple times but later chose to focus her career on mixed events, consistently challenging the world's top male players. In recent years, she has reduced her competitive activity to dedicate herself to teaching and an academic career, while remaining a central figure in contemporary chess;



5. *Judit Polgár*: represents a unique figure in the history of chess. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she never participated in the Women's World Chess Championship, choosing instead to compete exclusively in open tournaments. In 1991, she earned the title of Grandmaster, becoming the youngest person in history to achieve this at the time. Polgár defeated numerous world champions, including Garry Kasparov and Magnus Carlsen, and in January 2003, she joined



the exclusive club of players who have achieved a FIDE rating of 2700 or higher, a feat no other woman has achieved to this day.

In 2005, she narrowly missed qualifying for the match for the absolute world chess title, further cementing her status as a legend in the game.



Harry Siddons Mowbray, *Repose - A Game of Chess*, Olio su tela, circa 1897.

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To delve deeper into the topic, you can explore the title:

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