

# Why There Are So Few Female Chess Grandmasters

Only those of very hard hearts can fail to admire Beth, the heroine of Walter Tevis's magnificent novel, and now a popular television series, [The Queen's Gambit](#). We love the idea of her, a girl who makes good, starting off from very modest beginnings. She overcomes alcohol and drug addictions and rises to the very top of her profession: chess.

But Beth's story raises the question as to why there are so few female champion chess players.

At time of writing, there are 1,731 [chess grandmasters](#), the acknowledged leaders in their field. In order to enter this honored company, a player needs to have attained a 2500 Elo rating from the International Chess Federation at any point in their career, and [earned two favorable tournament results](#), referred to as norms. For some perspective, my own rating was around 1700 when I played in tournaments, which means I barely know which way the knight moves, so any grandmaster who couldn't beat me with queen odds ought to be ashamed of himself.

How many women currently hold the grandmaster title? Only [37 as of January 2021](#). That's just 2 percent. There are several hypotheses bruited about to account for this gargantuan disproportion.

## 1. Sexism

Sexism is the explanation offered by all too many reviewers of *The Queen's Gambit*, yet there was only one instance of it in the book. Namely, when the then unrated Beth Harmon entered her first tournament. Relegated to the female section, her first two opponents were women. That is hardly a ringing

endorsement for the sexism hypothesis.

Are there any “male only” chess tournaments? Not to my knowledge, at least not for the last three decades. There may be a few ignorant parents who tell their daughters that chess is unfeminine and that nice girls do not do that, but this hardly explains the phenomenon mentioned above. (Hint: For single women wishing to meet a guy, enter a chess tournament! The odds are fantastically in your favor!)

## 2. Less Participation

Considering my hint above, this is indeed correct, but this is at least as much an effect of this phenomenon as it is the cause. Females are perhaps just less interested in this nerdy game than males, many of whom are effectively addicted to it.

## 3. Differing Testosterone Levels

With testosterone comes competitiveness. Even including chess’s many draws, this Game of Kings is highly competitive. Although the players sit on their rears for hours on end, their heart beats are similar to those of marathon runners. They sweat bullets with no obvious physical exertion. Boxers do too, but theirs is not merely a mental exercise.

## 4. Geography and Spatial Awareness

Chess is a game of geography. Good players keep their eyes riveted on 64 spaces. It may well be that men are, to a far greater degree than women, hardwired topographically.

An obvious instance of this is that [men generally have a better sense of direction](#) than women. Why should this be? One hypothesis stems from sociobiology, or evolutionary psychology. When our species was living in trees or caves long ago, women stayed close to home base, picking berries,

washing, cooking, and cleaning.

Men, by contrast, went a-hunting. This activity took them dozens, perhaps scores of miles away from their starting points. If they didn't have a good sense of direction and a good feel for geography, they perished, leaving less genetic material to the next generation. The environment selected in favor of geographical expertise for men to a far greater degree than for women. As chess is a geographical game, males have a decided advantage.

## 5. Variance

The standard deviation of male abilities is far greater than that of females. Women are God's, or nature's, insurance policy. Men are His, or its, crap shoot.

We find very few women in mental institutions, prisons, or homeless shelters. These places are far more often inhabited by men. People of this ilk often lie two, three, or even four standard deviations below the mean. Similarly, we see very few women on the outer reaches of STEM, economics, and, yes, chess.

Former Harvard President Larry Summers was once forced to vacate his office by the wokesters of the day for [musing on this subject](#), but that does not render this hypothesis false.

Make no mistake, chess, at top levels, takes a lot of brain power. You have to memorize hundreds of opening moves. Success does not come by seeing into the future of the game by a mere half dozen moves. Triple that, and you are closer to the miracles these brainiacs often perform. But there are very few women with abilities two, three, and four standard deviations above the mean.

Does this mean girls should not be taught chess and that women should not play this game? Of course not. That would be

preposterous. Everyone should enjoy whatever pursuits ring their bells. But we should not be surprised at male dominance at the leading edge of this quintessentially intellectual sport.

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