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That claim raises the eyebrows of the greatest female chess player, Judit Polgar, who was ranked as high as No 8 in the world and, amusingly, has a winning record against Short. “It is not down to biology,” she tells the Guardian. “It’s just as possible for a woman to become the best as any guy. But there are so many difficulties and social boundaries for women generally in society. That is what blocks it.”

Polgar, who defeated 11 current or former world champions in either rapid or classical chess, including Garry Kasparov and Magnus Carlsen, before retiring in 2014, believes that an early start, encouraging girls to think big, and better teaching are crucial factors. “All champions and big players start to play chess and get familiar with the game at a pretty early age,” says the Hungarian grandmaster, who is now a commentator on the website Chess24.


The Hungarian Judit Polgar, the most successful female player in chess, pictured in 2017. Photograph: Peter Kohalmi/AFP/Getty Images

The development biologist Emma Hilton also dismisses the idea that the gap between men and women can be put down to genetics. A crucial point, she says, is that chess has an “extremely skewed starting pool” - with far more boys learning to play the game than girls. That, she says, “makes it extremely unlikely that we will see a female world champion”.

The English international master Jovanka Houska believes this smaller pool has knock-on effects in other areas, particularly when it comes to being the only one or two girls in a group. “We have situations where the girls don’t feel very comfortable playing, whilst the boys can hang around, make friends and play amongst themselves and get better that way,” she says.

Is sexism also a factor? “It is, sadly,” says Houska. “It’s mainly because there are so few women playing. And it’s reinforced by national federations who don’t publicise your achievements to help you with funding. When I look at the situation across Europe, I see a lot of top women players fighting their federations for basic things.”

There is also a far darker side in all this. Last year the women’s Fide master Alexandra Botez, who is also the most popular female chess streamer, spoke of her shocking experiences in the sport and warned: “In chess so much predatory behaviour has been normalised.”

In Botez’s view, it is far too common for men to use their age and position to go on the “hunt” for women and girls. “It has been going on for so long and no one blinks an eye,” she said. “The extent to which people never say anything and find things OK is pretty spooky.” Other women have echoed similar concerns to the Guardian but none of them wanted to go public.

The chessboard on which Magnus Carlsen and Ian Nepomniachtchi are playing for the world championship title in Dubai. Photograph: Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images

Yet there are encouraging signs, too. As Houska points out, it is far more common to see women chess players and commentators than only a few years ago. “It’s very important to have that visibility,” she says. “Because if girls have role models, they can start to adjust their expectations and aims.”

The Fide president, Arkady Dvorkovich, also promises he is pushing hard to make the game more welcoming for women. He rattles off a list of changes he has made during his tenure, including more tournaments and increased prize money for women.

The organisation has also designated 2022 as the “Year of Woman in Chess”, however Dvorkovich accepts more can be done to help women progress to the very top. “Around 13-14 years old we find that girls leave while boys continue to play in large numbers. We need to change that. Personally I would also like to see more women in the top 10. But chess is not just about professional play. We have more women across the game now, including Dana Reizniece-Ozola, the former finance minister of Latvia, who is our managing director.”

Women’s chess also recently attracted its biggest sponsor - although the decision of Fide to partner with the breast enlargement company Motiva was described as “gross” and “misogynistic” by some.

“We consulted with many chess players, 95% of them supported it,” says Dvorkovich. “We appreciate there are some components of this business that do not look that attractive. But what they’re doing also for health and wellbeing for women is very important. I know it’s a bit controversial, but there are more pluses.”

Polgar also errs on the side of optimism, pointing out that attitudes among most men have shifted from an era when the legendary world champion Bobby Fischer used to dismiss women players as “terrible”, telling them to “keep strictly to the home”.

“Nowadays most of the top players would not dare even to say - or even to think that way,” she says. “Fischer was the most ridiculous. And another world champion, Garry Kasparov, also said some things because he grew up in that kind of environment.

“But when I came in the picture, and I was torturing Garry at the board, little by little he transformed his vision. So this is what I’m saying: many people think that people - or the community - cannot change. But it is possible.”

A question for chess remains, however: is change happening fast enough?

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