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QUEENS IN THE SHADOW OF KINGS – SOCIOLOGICAL NOTES ON THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF WOMEN’S DISCRIMINATION AND EMANCIPATION IN CHESS

Abstract. The article concerns the unequal position of men and women in chess. This inequality is currently manifested in the male-dominated population of chess players, gender determined differences in the game level attained, and financial discrimination. Historical analysis shows that over the centuries chess has been regarded as a pastime suitable for both men and women. It was only the process of institutionalization of chess as a sport (and turning it into serious leisure activity, in R. Stebbins’ typology), which took place in the era of industrial society, that discrimination against women in chess came about. The emancipatory activities of women in this field, dating back to the second half of the 19th century, were commented on in the chess press in two ways, which are referred to in the text as the “Steinitz narrative” and the “de Coubertin narrative”. Both of these perspectives have remained resilient to this day, accompanying the progress in equalizing the position of men and women in chess that were seen in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Keywords: chess, sport, discrimination against women in sport.

If we engage the queens of our hearts for the queens of our boards and if we can enlist the interest of our connubial mates for our chessical mates, our intellectual pastime will be immensely benefited and will pass into universal favor.

Wilhelm Steinitz (1836–1900)
the first world champion in chess

Female Olympiad would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and, we are not afraid to add, incorrect [...]. This is not our idea of the Olympic Games, where we feel we have sought and must continue to seek the realisation of the following: the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art as a setting and female applause as a reward.

Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937)
founder of the modern Olympic movement

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Instead of an introduction – about gender inequality in contemporary chess

The article is based on the presumption that in chess – as in other sports – an unequal situation between men and women can be observed. The aim of the analysis is to describe, from a sociological perspective, the historical process in which this inequality was shaped, and thus to offer an explanation of this phenomenon. As will be shown, the origins of today's discrimination against women in chess lie in processes that emerged more than 200 years ago, and the arguments that are being used to this day to justify or combat this inequality were formulated about a century and a half ago.

First of all, it is necessary to justify the presumption indicated above, which consists of two statements: (1) chess is a sport; (2) the position of men and women in chess is unequal. With regard to the first claim, it must be admitted that the identification of chess as a sport is not uncontroversial, and it is not possible to consider chess a sport on the basis of certain definitions of sport (which emphasize the element of physical activity as constitutive, but which is absent in the case of chess and other so-called mental sports). However, there are also other options in scientific discourse whose representatives ignore the aspect of physical activity when defining sport (Giulianotti 2005: xii-xiii). It is also important to note that there are indications that in the near future the entire field of mental sports, as well as eSports, will be widely recognized as belonging to the sports domain (Kobiela 2018: 291–293). The decisive factor, for us, is that chess is socially recognized as a sport (Stempień 2020).

As for the second claim about the unequal situation of men and women in chess, there is no space here to discuss this issue in a sufficiently thorough manner. Let's also point out that these considerations will concern the expert, professional level of chess (even if it is not a main source of income), not chess in its recreational form. The most important thing seems to be that this inequality today consists of at least three (related) phenomena: the population of chess players is strongly male-dominated, women present a lower level of play than men, and women experience financial discrimination in chess. Let's try to document – even if briefly – these three issues.

Emma Baccellieri (2019: 59) reminds us: “just 14% of US Chess Federation members are female. That might seem low, but it's a record high, reached in 2018”. What is more, the Commission for Women's Chess Report prepared for the 90th FIDE Congress (fr. *Fédération Internationale des Échecs*) in 2020, states that women represent only 14% of the total of 3452 international chess judges (International Arbiter – IA or FIDE Arbiter – FA) (90th FIDE Congress 2020). Referring to situation in Poland, it should be noted that a survey by the Central Statistical Office showed that, in 2018, 17886 people (affiliated with sports clubs and physical culture organizations) were engaged in competitive chess, of which

27% were women (Cierpień-Wolan 2019: 21, 27). For a comparison, the figures for 2016 are respectively: 18807 people and 29% of women (Cierpień-Wolan 2017: 28).

As far as the level of play is concerned, it should be noted that in the case of chess there is no formal division into male and female games. The rivalry is open, but due to the relatively lower level of play presented by women, there are, in a way, additional tournaments or classifications for them. Formally, therefore, there is no competition exclusively for men, although in fact competition in the “open” category (e.g., within the Chess Olympiads or competitions for individual world championships) is very strongly male-dominated. In order to document the fact that women in chess do not perform as well as men, let’s point out that in May 2020 the current women’s world chess champion, Ju Wenjun, was ranked 462nd on the world ranking list of the best players. Higher positions than her in the world ranking were held by the ex-champion Yifan Hou (84th place, the only woman among the top 100 chess players), Humpy Koner (335th place) and Aleksandra Goryachkina (353rd place).¹ International research, carried out in 24 countries around the world, confirmed that at the expert (professional) level of competition men represent a higher level of the game, and this can be considered a kind of cultural universality (Blanch 2016).

We should remember that no woman has ever become a world champion, or reached the final match of the championship. In general, not many female chess players – at the grandmaster level – decide to compete against men; most of them limit themselves to taking part in women’s competitions. Of course, one can recall the individual counterexamples of Pia Cramling or Zsuzsa and Judit Polgár, who were the precursors of contemporary women’s participation in men’s tournaments (in 2004 and 2005 Judit was in world top 10 players – obviously as the only woman). Similarly, from a historical perspective, it can be recalled that Vera Menchik, who was active before World War II, was also not limited to competing in women’s tournaments. However, it was completely unprecedented at the time, and is still considered exceptional even today.² Let us recall that the inclusion of Chantal Chaudé de Silans in the French national team for the 1950 Chess Olympiad caused a great sensation. She was the first woman to compete in the Olympiad (at that time the women’s Olympiads were not yet held), apart from Edith Holloway,

¹ <https://ratings.fide.com/> (accessed 27.05.2020).

² It was a huge sensation to invite Menchik to the great international tournament in Karlovy Vary, which was to take place in 1929. The Austrian master A. Becker was so shocked by the woman’s participation in this tournament that, after it was opened, he spoke in a rather disrespectful tone that anyone who loses to Menchik would be “immortalized” by membership in the Vera Menchik club. Becker was severely punished for this statement, as he became the first member of this “club”. Later this list was supplemented by such strong chess players as M. Euwe, S. Reshevsky, M. Sultan Khan, G. Thomas, and C.H.O’D. Alexander, E. Colle, F.D. Yates and others (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 584–585).

who was part of the English national team at the unofficial Olympiad in Paris in 1924, accompanying the 8th Olympic Games.

As for the financial discrimination of women in chess, let us recall that 2018 saw the World Cup match between Mangu Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana (London) and the female championship tournament (Khanty-Mansiysk; Western Siberia). Baccellieri (2019: 61) notes:

At the 2018 World Chess Championship the total prize was \$1.1 million; at the 2018 Women's World Chess Championship, \$450,000. Consider the playing field, though, and the gap looks far bigger. Two men split the \$1.1 million; 64 women shared the \$450,000. The women's champion, Ju Wenjun, took home \$60,000. Carlsen left the men's event with roughly \$620,000.

This is not a new problem. At the 1927 London tournament, the winner of which – the aforementioned Vera Menchik – was declared world champion, the main prize was 20 pounds sterling (with an entry fee of 1 pound) (Winter 2015a). In the same year, the challenger Alexander Alekhine had to pay a deposit of \$10,000 to play the championship match with the world champion, José Raúl Capablanca (Gawlikowski 1976: 99–102).³

The inequality of the status of men and women in chess is therefore manifested in different levels of participation, in different levels of play achieved, and in financial disparities. The gender inequality in chess has been the subject of scientific investigation only to a limited extent. Most of the work is aimed at explaining the unequal results achieved by male and female chess players. The low popularity of chess among women is identified as being a factor that causes their poorer results (in accordance with the assumption that in a larger population it is easier to obtain extreme values, in this case, outstanding chess skills) (Bilalić et al. 2009; Charness, Gerchak 1996). Other authors refer to the role played by partially different biological functioning, demonstrating, for example, that women, in comparison with men, are more likely to experience mental fatigue due to – hormonally conditioned – lower levels of glycogen, which is used by the body in conditions of mental exertion (Veličković, Radovanović 2018: 360–361). The influence of gender stereotypes on the level of play is also considered. It is worth recalling an interesting Italian experiment in which chess players (men and women) played each other over the Internet. If the women did not know the gender of their opponent, they played as well as the men. If they knew that they were playing with men, the level of their game was significantly reduced. When falsely informed that they were playing with women, they attained an unchanged (high) level of play (Maass et al. 2008).

It is more difficult to find social and historical analyses that would deal with the formation, throughout history, of gender inequality in chess, or with the for-

³ As Edward Winter (2003) notes, the so-called London Protocol, which at the time regulated the rules of the World Championship, provided for: “Of the total amount of the purse the champion shall receive 20% as a fee. Of the remaining 80% the winner to receive 60% and the loser 40%”.

mation of appropriate narratives to justify this inequality or, on the contrary, to combat it. An important exception is the work of Jordi Brasó-Rius, *Los inicios de la mujer en la práctica del ajedrez en España (1922–1935)*, but it concerns the situation in Spain. The aim of this paper is to make up for this deficiency, that is, to define the moment in history when the gender imbalance in chess was formed in the Western world, to show the social conditions underlying this process, and the attempts to consolidate and change the order thus formed. It will be worthwhile to start the analysis by returning to the ancient origins of chess.

Chess, women and premodernity

Researchers agree that chess – created in the 6th century AD in India – has not always been a pastime reserved only for men. Władysław Litmanowicz and Jerzy Giżycki (1986: 438) emphasize that “the chronicles, legends and literary works of ancient times refer to women who play chess well, making them the heroines of numerous situations in which the ability to compete on a chessboard played a decisive role in the course of the action”.⁴ Examples include the 12th-century lay *Eliduc* by Marie de France (Giżycki 1984: 17), the 13th-century epic poem *Huon de Bordeaux* (Bubczyk 2018: 133–134) and the anonymous poem *Les Échecs amoureux* (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 221), dated to the 14th century. It should also be remembered that the Arabic writing (*One Thousand and One Nights*), old Russian oral epic poems (*bylina*), as well as miniatures decorating Indian, Persian and Arabic manuscripts, feature women playing chess (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 438; Sołtysiak 2014: 156; Giżycki 1984: 21). On the basis of these representations⁵ it can be concluded that the participation of women in chess games in ancient times was either something ordinary, or at the very least was something that happened.

Moreover, it is worth critically considering the cliché of chess as a miniature of a battle or war, and therefore as something potentially reserved for men. In fact, originally (in India and China), chess was a game of warriors and the ruling class, through which they practiced strategic thinking. It was usually played by men and older boys. Since it was a game of war, it seems logical to symbolically depict a typical army. The pawns and figures depicted military units used in battles (Sołtysiak 2014: 155). The game was played with chariots (rooks), elephants

⁴ Own translation (JRS).

⁵ We assume that literary works (or more broadly: works of art) are relatively reliable sources, and the reality presented is to some extent accurate to the experiences of then audiences (otherwise, the author would risk his work being rejected as improbable, inconceivable or untrue). Thus works of art and the artistic message inform us about the structures of the real world (Bubczyk 2018: 132–133). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, to some extent, real social relations, norms of behavior and customs are reflected in the world presented by the author (Bubczyk 2018: 139).

(bishops), cavalry (knights), infantry (pawns) and kings and viziers (queens). However, when chess reached Europe, it underwent some transformations. From the point of view of further deliberations, the transformation of the metaphor seems important. Chess ceased to imitate a battle, and instead the name of pieces began to refer rather to the structure of medieval society. Let us begin with the transformation of the figure of the vizier into the queen, which can be seen as a kind of recognition of the political role of women at that time (Sołtysiak 2014: 159; Brasó-Rius 2016: 338). It should be pointed out that the queen is the strongest piece on the chessboard, with the largest range of movements. What is more, as Sołtysiak (2014: 160) aptly notes,

chess glorified the king and his wife, placing them at the very top of the pyramid of importance. Below were representatives of the mighty: bishops and knights; the political importance of the castles (rooks) with their trustees was emphasized as well. The lowest position was of the infantry, consisting mostly of the commoners and peasants. It is hard not to see here a symbolic image of medieval society.⁶

The above mentioned changes most probably took place before 1000 AD. (Sołtysiak 2014: 157–159). Thus, in the Middle Ages, chess ceased to be a military game (addressed rather to men), and became a manor or palace game (appropriate for both men and women), sometimes providing a pretext for romantic meetings (Bubczyk 2018; Sołtysiak 2014: 161–162).

Modernity did not bring about significant changes. Let us remember that St. Therese of Avila, a Spanish Carmelite woman living in the 16th century, had played chess as a child and clues regarding this interest were to be found in her religious writings, where she invoked the chess metaphor. St. Therese was proclaimed the patron saint of Spanish chess players in 1944 (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 1233). Above all, however, it is necessary to recall the sixteenth-century poem *Chess* by Jan Kochanowski, in which we have the opportunity to follow the chess duel between Fiedor and Borzuj, two newcomers from Slavic lands, whose stake is to marry the daughter of the Danish king Tarses. The game is postponed until the next morning, and at night, the king's daughter, favoring Fiedor, finds an unexpectedly victorious manoeuvre in a position that both players had already judged to be decisive for Borzuj (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 1184–1185). In the following centuries, women playing chess were still presented in works of art. It is enough to mention here the 17th century tragedy *Women Beware Women* by Thomas Middleton (Taylor, Loughrey 1984), Daniel Chodowiecki's 18th century engraving *Education*, or Martin Engelbrecht's engraving of *Chess or the game of kings* from the same period. If – considering the Middle Ages – the game of chess was adored by Empress Irena of Byzantium (Sołtysiak 2014: 156), the same can be said of Tsarina Catherine II (Giżycki 1984: 204). Intelligence, cleverness, and the ability to set a trap for an opponent – so useful in chess – were not considered typically male attributes at that time.

⁶ Own translation (JRS).

The institutionalization of chess as a sport

So, what was it that made chess, a pastime which had been suitable for both men and women, become, at some point in history, a game dominated by men, more willingly played by them, and at the same time, one where the lack of women's dispositions is explicitly mentioned? The most important thesis of this paper is that the change took place during the formation of the industrial society and was related to the consequences (correlates) of this process. As is well known, it was then, with the transfer of paid work from the household to the factory, that a clear gender divide developed: the public sphere was dominated by men, while women were limited to the private sphere (Szacka 2003: 381–382).

How did this play out in the case of chess? Well, at the turn of the 19th century the first chess clubs emerged in Europe (England, France, Germany, among others), as well as in the United States. Thus the game of chess underwent a certain specialization and institutionalization (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 416–417, 434–435; Gawlikowski 1976: 26–46). This may be related to a broader process through which organizational forms of sports amateurism were developed at that time (Sharples 2015: 300). As Wojciech Lipoński writes (1987: 322), “during the eighteenth century, the number of sports clubs grew in Great Britain and its American colonies. [...] On the European continent, the development of sports associations dates back to the third decade of the nineteenth century”.⁷ From the end of the 18th century, chess was increasingly identified as a sporting discipline in which one can improve and achieve excellence or mastery, as is the case with equestrianism, cycling or rowing.

These chess clubs were often founded on the basis of cafés, and the Café de la Régence in Paris, founded in 1740, played a special role here. Importantly, it was men that were the members of these clubs (which, after all, functioned within the public sphere). So if associations of this type – such as London's “Divan”, Parsloe's Chess Club, St. George Chess Club – promoted the best players, inviting them to guest appearances, organizing matches and tournaments (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 200, 863; Gawlikowski 1976: 26–46), all these events were attended by men. It is significant that the English chess player and writer George Walker, reporting in an article from 1841 on his visit to the Café de la Régence, notes that in the hustle and bustle he observed (only) two ladies who, by the way, came to the café with their husbands to... play dominoes (sic!) with them (Sharples 2015: 308–309).

Thus, it can be assumed that the process (dated to between the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century) of the initial institutionalization of chess as a sports discipline (initially while maintaining fidelity to the idea of noble amateurism), and thus the strengthening of its image in the public sphere, was necessarily and obviously an exclusive process for women. Referring

⁷ Own translation (JRS).

to Robert Stebbins' typology, we can say that it was then that the transformation of chess from *casual leisure* into *serious leisure* took place. The area of casual leisure includes activities undertaken for fun and pure pleasure, carried out in a non-systematic (also completely accidental) manner, at a low level of advancement, without preparation, or without much influence on the personal and social functioning of the individual (Stebbins 2001; Veal 2017: 206). The domain of serious leisure, on the other hand, consists of free-time activities carried out systematically over a long period of time, in a quasi-professional manner, which are identity-critical and, viewed chronologically, constitute a kind of career, while the individual assesses them as vitally important and valuable to himself or herself (Stebbins 1992; Veal 2017: 206). It seems that the process of the institutionalization of chess as a sport described here was the process of its transformation into serious leisure or, more precisely, the emergence and development of a form of practicing chess as a serious leisure activity, although probably playing chess remains a casual leisure activity for most people. Walker's firm declaration: *I am a chess-player!* can be seen (Sharples 2015) as a testimony to this transformation.

Suffragettes

As Paul Hoffman notes (2003),

Until the 19th century, women were not welcome in chess clubs in Europe and America. In the mid-1880s, a club in Turin, Italy, allowed the wives and daughters of its members to join them at the chessboard, a practice that was applauded by then-world champion Wilhelm Steinitz.

The opening of chess clubs to female membership was a slow process; however, in the second half of the 19th century women's chess clubs or women's sections in existing clubs started to be established in the USA and European countries (England, Germany, Holland, France) (Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 438; Brasó-Rius 2016: 338–339; Winter 2020). It is difficult to say when and where the first women's chess association was founded. Litmanowicz and Giżycki (1986: 438) give priority to Philadelphia, where the female chess club was established in 1864. However, in their monograph dedicated to women's associations in Great Britain, David Doughan and Peter Gordon (2006: 81) state:

Although there were women's chess clubs in the Netherlands as early as 1847, organized women's chess does not seem to have started in Britain until the 1880s, when the Brighton Chess Club had a ladies' branch which ran tournaments, and it was only in 1895 that the Ladies' Chess Club was established in London. For a long time women were segregated in clubs, partly on the grounds that they played less well than the men.

To sum up, it should be stated that the process of including women in the institutionalization of chess as a sport has been delayed by at least several dozen years in relation to that institutionalization itself.

Initially, the development of women's chess was hindered by the lack of interest from the women themselves, but the turn of the century brought positive changes (Brasó-Rius 2016: 338). As Litmanowicz and Giżycki (1986: 438) remind us, at a tournament in Hastings in 1895 the women's tournament was held parallel to the main one, and in 1897 the first international women's chess tournament took place in London. Against this backdrop, Jordi Brasó-Rius (2016: 339 et seq.) notes the significant backwardness of Spain, where the female chess movement only began to develop in the 1920s, and this process accelerated in the next decade, but was interrupted by the outbreak of civil war. Brasó-Rius (2016: 336–337) directly links the development of women's chess in Spain to a broader stream of emancipatory and equality activities, promoted and initiated by members of the royal family, among others.

After some time the first female chess stars began to appear. One must mention here Ellen Gilbert (died in 1900), who was famous for her excellent correspondence game, able to announce victory by checkmate in a dozen or even several dozen moves (!) and was once proclaimed Queen of Chess. Her successor was Sonia Graf (whose talent was taken care of by the German chess master and theoretician Siegbert Tarrasch) and, above all, the aforementioned Vera Menchik (trained by the Hungarian master Géza Maróczy), who became the first female chess world champion.

Two narratives: Steinitz *versus* de Coubertin

The second most important thesis of our paper is that since the beginning of the process of women's emancipation in chess, i.e. about the middle of the 19th century, we can observe a clash between two narratives connected with this process and which comment on it. The presence of these narratives can be noticed when studying press publications, including, above all, articles printed in chess periodicals (as an element of the discourse within the social world of chess).

The basis for our extraction of these two narratives is – analyzed in the spring of 2020 – a collection of more than 80 press excerpts available on the blog dedicated to the history of chess, run by Edward Winter (www.chesshistory.com) in the *Chess and Women* section.⁸ The blog is regularly updated, readers-Internauts send interesting fragments, information, quotations, photos and scans found during their own queries.

The first of the narrations we have distinguished would be called the “Steinitz narrative”, from the name of the first chess world champion. His statement, which favorably commented on the decision of the Chess Club in Turin to allow women to participate in the games, was used as the motto of the presented article. The

⁸ <https://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/women.html> (accessed 27.05.2020).

“Steinitz narrative” points out the need to encourage women to play chess, promotes the achievements of women in chess, lobbies for the participation of female chess players in tournaments and for the organization of such undertakings. An important argument is that chess is a good of all mankind and it would constitute an important value if the game of chess were as democratic and widespread as possible, because it has the potential to unite people. It is emphasized that chess, due to its nature, is something appropriate for women (balanced, quiet, intellectual entertainment). It should be noted, however, that in the case of this narrative the argumentation is not particularly developed, because the need to encourage women to play chess seems obvious to the representatives of this position and does not demand any justification. Instead, the inclusive initiatives or extraordinary results of individual female chess players are presented as good practices. Here are a few press statements from the second half of the 19th century that are typical of this perspective:

We present this month a correspondence game [...] between Mrs Gilbert, of Hartford, Connecticut, the strongest lady player in the United States, and Mr Berry, of Beverly, Massachusetts, in which the former announces a mate in 19 moves. The immeasurable superiority of trousers chess is often vaunted, and the natural incapability of women for excellence in the game is deduced from certain propositions, any one of which is a fact taken for granted, though neither self-evident nor demonstrable. The strength of men’s prejudices and of their boot-holding extremities are [sic!] generally about on a par, and very often they cooperate. Their physical superiority they use first as a force, and then as an argument. Excluding the ladies by the rule of fist from clubs and associations, discouraging their home play, and pooh-poohing their first timid efforts, the masculine countenance then lights up with an idiotic grin which seconds the enunciation. “Women play? Can’t do it, sir; Nature will otherwise. Let them cook and sew, that’s what they can do, sir”. Very much would we like to get hold of one of these oracles, place before him the position in which Mrs Gilbert announced “checkmate in 19 moves”, and ask him to find out how it was to be done. If, moreover, we could extract from him a pledge that he would not dine until he had solved it, then our cup of happiness would be overflowing, for we should have delicious visions of many dinnerless days as the just punishment of irrational prejudication

(“City of London Chess Magazine”, September 1875, pp. 253–254).

There was a time when a knowledge of chess was looked upon by women as well as men as a valuable accomplishment; and there is no reason why it should not be so regarded now. [...] We say unreservedly that chess is a game which is worthy of being cultivated by ladies. It is pleasantly quiet, and they possess many of the qualities which should characterize the votary of the game. They have patience, they are nice in calculating, as well as quick in devising a means of attack or defense. It has far too much variety ever to grow tiresome, and especially in the long wintry evenings, if only as affording rest from the unceasing whirl of fashionable pleasure, should it once more find a place among the recognized home pastimes of the day

(“Chess Player’s Chronicle”, 15th March 1881, pp. 121–122).

Ladies have latterly invaded almost all the fields hitherto occupied by men, but at the beginning of last year they had not yet gone so far as to form a chess club for themselves. That was a state of affairs which only needed to be noticed in order to be remedied, and so the Ladies’

Chess Club came into existence in the month of January 1895. In the beginning it did not include many members, and the members [...] used to meet at one another's houses and study the Royal Game. But the institution was one of the things which, since they meet a long-felt want, are bound to have a rapid success, and before long the list of members had swelled to such dimensions that it was felt to be necessary to have a club-room. This was found, and Monday evenings were devoted to the game, the afternoon visits being still kept up, until the members obtained their present premises, where the weekly meeting is held from three to half-past ten

(“Black and White”, 14th March 1896, p. 334).

We have named the opposite position the “de Coubertin narrative”, from the name of the initiator of the modern Olympic movement and founder of the International Olympic Committee. Pierre de Coubertin was opposed to women's participation in the Games, to the organization of the Women's Olympic Games, and, as he himself put it, to the participation of women in sports competitions held in public space (DeFrantz 1997: 18; Terret 2013: 6–7). Although it is not known whether de Coubertin was passionate about chess or if, for example, he took any steps to include chess in the program of the Games, his unequivocal and consistent stance towards female sport can be seen as patronizing in some way the narrative that prohibits women's participation in chess competitions. One of his categorical statements on this issue is the second motto of our article. The “de Coubertin narrative” appeared in response to the emancipatory actions of women in the domain of chess. Public statements included in this trend indicate that the game of chess is something fundamentally inappropriate for women, and above all, it is unsuitable for their mentality, due to their low ability to compete, concentrate or formulate original ideas. Some of the statements emphasize that the tasks and role of women remain (and should remain) connected with the home. In order to justify the opinion that women should not play chess, the fact of women's fundamental lack of achievements in chess (lack of outstanding sports results, lack of significant or even any contribution to the development of the theory of the game) is invoked. Importantly, in the “de Coubertin narrative”, the case of argumentation is crucial. This position is, therefore, supported by justifications, and it can be assumed that it is not considered to be “self-explanatory”, even by its representatives, and thus it is not obvious to the audience. As such, it must be proved. Below are a few press releases from the early 20th century that can be considered representative of this trend:

In the whole of its enormous literature there does not appear the name of any woman among the stars of the first, second or third magnitude. One may go through volume after volume containing thousands of games and not find a single one played by women which any editor has thought worthy of a permanent record. [...] A careful examination of the games of players whom the world recognizes as great reveals the fact that the faculties and qualities of concentration, comprehensiveness, impartiality and, above all, a spark of originality, are to be found in combination and in varying degrees. The absence of these qualities in woman explains why no member of the feminine sex has occupied any high position as a chessplayer

(“Lasker's Chess Magazine”, April 1906, pp. 276–277).

The home has been and still is woman's chief stronghold, whence she can achieve conquests that keep mankind under permanent subjection. Surely the average club room, with its smoke-laden atmosphere, is not the magnet to attract her, and it is here where mere man obtains the foundation of his knowledge and experience which his "concentration, comprehensiveness, impartiality and originality" are destined, in isolated cases, to transform into the genius of mastership

(*"American Chess Bulletin"*, January 1908, pp. 4–6).

A woman's mind is a market place crowded with so many mental reflections that it is hardly fair to ask her to concentrate on what is purely a man's game. Chess is the weak spot in her mental armor. When a woman plays at chess she is apt to rest her chin on her hand and incidentally display her rings. While in deep meditation as to how to capture the king she suddenly is attracted by the arrival of a friend clad in exquisite furs. The fair player's thoughts are diverted to the smart apparel shop. As soon as her strict attention slips its anchor the winning move of the chess game, which would stick like a burr in a man's mind, rises like a shadow across her memory. Her chess atmosphere then becomes foggy, and the social atmosphere decidedly clear. [...] Women trying to play chess are like people leading horses they dare not ride. It will never be a woman's game

(*"American Chess Bulletin"*, April 1924, p. 99).

Of the two narratives we have distinguished, the "Steinitz narrative" seems a little older, while the "de Coubertin narrative" emerged with a certain delay, in response to the already ongoing efforts to emancipate women in chess. This hypothesis is based on the dating of the materials available on the aforementioned blog, dedicated to the history of chess, and needs to be verified during a systematic query of historical chess magazines. If this hypothesis is correct, the "Steinitz narrative" would have appeared between 1875 and 1900, and the "de Coubertin narrative" in the early 20th century. Throughout the entire 20th century, these two perspectives have clashed, maintaining their resilience to this day. During this time, there was a constant, albeit slow, bumpy and still unfinished process of equalizing the position of men and women in chess.

The 20th century – towards gender equality in chess

The 20th century witnessed many activities aimed at equalising the status of men and women in chess. However, these activities were often of a limited range. This is shown by the history of women's world championships and women's chess Olympiads. The scope of discrimination was gradually reduced, but the process was slow, and both of the narratives outlined above were important commentaries or perhaps even influenced its pace – although it is difficult to make an unequivocal statement in this regard.

The history of women's chess world championships is relatively short. It was not until nearly 40 years after the match between Steinitz and Johannes Zukertort (1888), generally considered the first official game for the World Chess Championship (Gawlikowski 1976; <http://www.olimbase.org/index.php>⁹), that the

⁹ Accessed 27.05.2020.

female tournament in London (as an event accompanying the Chess Olympiad) was played in 1927. As was mentioned, it was won by Vera Menchik, and she was declared female world champion (Gawlikowski 1978: 22–23; Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 698). Significantly, however, there is a lot of evidence that the tournament was only *ex post* recognized as a game of world primacy. Winter (2015a) sarcastically notes: “It is difficult to imagine a world championship title being decided in an event whose participants did not know that they were contesting the title, but that happened in 1927”. This can be treated as a kind of indicator of how female chess was viewed. Until the outbreak of World War II, FIDE organized women’s world championships in the formula of tournaments accompanying the next Olympiads (won invariably by Menchik¹⁰). Thus, these tournaments were held “as an aside” to the chess Olympiads, as accompanying events, with a small prize. This could not have had a positive impact on their prestige.

At the same time, the men competed for the championship in the formula of a match between two players (not a tournament), consisting of a dozen or more games. This difference was assessed as follows by world champion Alekhine in 1939, commenting on the deficient level of some games played by Menchik:

It is totally unfair to persuade a player of an acknowledged superclass like Miss Menchik to defend her title year after year in tournaments composed of very inferior players. It is not surprising that after so many tournaments she has lost much of her interest, and plays some games casually, much below her strength. But such accidental difficulties could not possibly be decisive in a championship, if it were settled, like any title of importance, in a match and not in a tournament (Winter 2020).

It was not until after the Second World War that the formula of women’s and men’s (open) world championship competitions in chess was equalized.¹¹

Chess is not an Olympic discipline, and since 1927 FIDE has been organizing – initially irregularly, now in two-year cycles – its own Olympiads.¹² The first

¹⁰ One exception is the two world championship matches between Vera Menchik and Sonia Graf. The first one took place in Amsterdam in 1934, and the venue of the games was... the private home of Max Euwe – the then leading global chess player and chess activist. In 1937 both female chess players met again, this time in Semmering. Although the venue was the Grand Hotel Panhans, it was an event organized privately, as before. Nevertheless, FIDE declared its willingness to acknowledge the result of this match and the match itself (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php> – accessed 27.05.2020; Litmanowicz, Giżycki 1986: 699–700).

¹¹ For a long time in a series of eliminations, a pretender was selected who stood up to a match with the current champion/female champion. When at the end of the twentieth century FIDE decided to change the formula of the game to the cup system, the decision concerned both the world champion and the female champion. Over time, the system of matches between the current champion and challenger was reverted to the knockout system; although in the case of women’s championships, the knockout system was kept for longer.

¹² Leyla Dimitrova (2015: 197) explains: “The use of the name “Chess Olympiad” [...] is of historical origin and implies no connection with the Olympic Games”.

female Olympiad was not organized until 1957 (Maric 2007: 195–196); before that, women were able to compete within the “common” Olympiad, which in practice (apart from the aforementioned cases of Holloway and de Silans) did not happen. Starting with the 1972 Skopje Olympiad (with one exception) the “male” Olympiads (formally open) and female ones were organized together (at the same time and in the same city), but in the formula of two separate tournaments. Since 1984, however, a solution has been adopted according to which both events are conducted within the one tournament (continuous numbering is used, starting from the first men’s Olympiad); however, the games are conducted separately for men (open tournament) and women (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php>;¹³ Dimitrova 2015). It is worth paying some attention to the period when the men’s and women’s Olympiads were organized separately. The sporting and organizational differences that could be observed at that time seem to be interesting from the point of view of the process of achieving gender equality in chess.

Among the sporting differences between the men’s and women’s Olympiads, from a historical perspective, the first thing to mention is that the national teams for the female competition were smaller for a long time (during the first women’s Olympiad there were not even any bench warmers!). Only in 2008 at the Dresden Olympiad did women take part for the first time in four-person teams (not counting the bench warmers), as had been the case with men’s competitions from the beginning (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php>¹⁴). Another sporting difference between the men’s and women’s Olympiads was the pace of the game (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php>;¹⁵ Gawlikowski 1978: 479). Generally, the ladies were supposed to play a bit faster, having less time to think (which was measured with special clocks). The relatively fast pace of the game and initially small female teams allow us to conclude that in the past the conditions of women’s competition were not conducive to encouraging the best performance possible and obtaining fully reliable results. It is assumed that women’s chess was underestimated by FIDE and the organizers of the Olympiads as generally remaining at a rather low level of play, and that possible disturbances in the results obtained were not a significant problem.

As far as organizational differences are concerned, they also seem to be – like sports differences – a derivative of the general disregard for female chess. Generally speaking, it can be said that the location of the women’s Olympiads was less attractive; this applies to the choice of host cities, reserved game rooms and accommodation. Let’s start by saying that the women’s Olympiads were generally held in small towns that were not capital cities and were not always interesting for

¹³ Accessed 27.05.2020.

¹⁴ Accessed 27.05.2020.

¹⁵ Accessed 27.05.2020.

tourists: Emmen¹⁶ / Holland (1957), Split / Yugoslavia (1963), Oberhausen / West Germany (1966), Lublin / Poland (1969), Medellin / Colombia (1974) (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php>¹⁷). The locations of the men's Olympiads were, in contrast, more attractive: Moscow / USSR (1956), Munich / West Germany (1958), Leipzig / East Germany (1960), Varna / Bulgaria (1962), Tel Aviv / Israel (1964), Havana / Cuba (1966), Lugano / Switzerland (1968), Siegen / West Germany (1970) and Nice / France (1974) (<http://www.olimpbase.org/index.php>¹⁸).

It is interesting to study the accommodation conditions for the women's Olympiads. During the first Olympiads, the chess players were lodged in private homes, a solution without precedent and, as Gawlikowski tactfully states (1978: 480; see also Litmanowicz 2005: 32–34), “on the one hand, created a family atmosphere, but on the other hand, of course, it must have been a bit embarrassing.”¹⁹ The editors of www.olimpbase.org write as follows about the Emmen Olympiads: “This is probably the only major international chess contest ever where players were lodged in private apartments, and not in the hotels”. The games were held in the factory's common room located in the town (<http://www.olimpbase.org/1957w/1957in.html#trivia>;²⁰ Gawlikowski 1978: 480). Some progress in this field is noticed in the case of the next two Olympiads, but already during the Lublin Olympiad the players were located in a student hostel, far away from the venue, i.e. the hall of the Provincial Sports and Tourism Center, was designed for basketball (sic!) (Gawlikowski 1978: 500; <http://www.olimpbase.org/1969w/1969in.html>; <http://pzszech.pl/2019/08/26/olimpiada-w-lublinie-1969/>²¹). For comparison, at the same time, the games of the men's Olympiads took place in: The Central Theatre of the Red Army (Moscow 1956), the Deutsches Museum (Munich 1958), the Ring-Messehaus (Leipzig 1960), the Casino Restaurant (Golden Sands 1962), the Sheraton Hotel (Tel Aviv 1964), the Habana-Libre Hotel (Havana 1966), the Padiglione Conza Exhibition Hall (Lugano 1968) and the Sigerlandhalle Congress Center (Siegen 1970) (Gawlikowski 1978; <http://www.olimpbase.org>²²). It can be assumed that the organizers of the men's Olympiads respected the players, coaches, referees and fans much more, wanting to provide them with not only comfortable, but often luxurious conditions.

The history of the Chess Olympiads shows the process of through which female and male chess were equalized. The starting point is the absence of women;

¹⁶ In her memoirs Mirosława Litmanowicz, Polish female chess master, writes: Emmen is a small town. In those years it did not have a town privileges, so it was simply a village. Almost all inhabitants were somehow connected with the event (2005: 33).

¹⁷ Accessed 27.05.2020.

¹⁸ Accessed 27.05.2020.

¹⁹ Own translation (JRS).

²⁰ Accessed 27.05.2020.

²¹ Accessed 27.05.2020.

²² Accessed 27.05.2020.

the Games were practically reserved for men for more than a quarter of a century. The next stage is the stage of separate organization of the men's and women's Olympiads (at different times and in different places), with a lot of evidence that female chess was then depreciated (sports and organizational differences), and the very fact of organizing women's tournaments was considered a certain achievement. The next phase involved gradually equalizing and combining the ladies' and gentlemen's tournaments, so that eventually women would compete in the same event as men (open and female tournaments), under similar sports conditions.²³ The whole process was spread over several decades of the 20th century.

Instead of a summary – vitality of narratives

The representatives of the “de Coubertin narrative” commented on the process of equalizing the position of women and men in chess, emphasizing the fact that the differences in sports performance has not been diminishing and formulating assumptions about their possible biological determinations. Many of the leading players of the second half of the 20th century can be regarded as contemporary representatives of this perspective: the sharp-tongued Dutch champion Jan Donner, the misogynist Robert Fischer (world champion from 1972–1975) and Nigel Short, who was one of the world's best players at the turn of the century (quotes from the blog www.chesshistory.com):

I was even accused of racial discrimination. “Donner forgot to add blacks to his statement. It should read »women and blacks cannot play chess, because they are more stupid than we are«, was foisted upon me by a lady of Amsterdam. This lady misunderstood. Black men can play chess all right, black women cannot. That is the whole point (Donner 2006: 162–164).

Although Winter (2015a; 2015b) argues that the following statement by Fischer from 1962 could have been manipulated (the interview was not authorized and the recordings were deleted), two things deserve attention. First, the quote seems typical for “Bobby”, and secondly (as follows from this) it was considered by many chess players to be fully true, and so it had a commentary function on the emancipation of women in chess, feeding the “de Coubertin narrative”.

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

(“Harper's Magazine”, January 1962, pp. 49–55).

²³ The participants of the “open” tournament within the Chess Olympiads compete for the Hamilton-Russel Cup and receive individual medals. Within the female tournament, the competition per analogy takes place for the Vera Menchik Cup and individual medals.

The “Steinitz narrative” also retained its vitality. Fischer’s words were interpreted as a declaration that he could give knight odds even in a game with the then female world champion Nona Gaprindashvili. The Yugoslav Grandmaster Petar Trifunović replied to this in one of his articles as follows:

Someone once asserted to the writer that women’s chess is very weak, declaring as proof that Bobby Fischer said he can give knight odds to the women’s champion. The writer doesn’t know that Fischer said anything of the sort, but is sure no-one can give knight odds to Nona Gaprindashvili

(“Chess Review”, December 1963, p. 367).

The words of the Australian Grandmaster in the correspondence game, Cecil Purdy, who was also involved in chess journalism, which was an important voice within the “Steinitz narrative”, come from the same period:

In my opinion the general male superiority in chess has been mainly a matter of fashion. For a long time it has been “in” for boys to play chess, and for some of them to study it from books – only those who study it become good. It has not hitherto been “in” for girls, and among them the idea of studying chess books has been regarded as eccentric. This situation is altering slightly. If it begins to change completely, chess will become again a two-sex game, as it has been at other times in history, especially in mediaeval Europe

(“Chess World”, March–April 1967, p. 52).

It seems that the “de Coubertin narrative” is weakening somewhat, although statements from this area can still be encountered. The position of men and women in chess is not equal today, but over the last dozen or so decades, significant progress has been made, which the representatives of the “de Coubertin narrative” have not been able to effectively oppose. The successes in the emancipation of women in chess were, of course, a result of the general emancipation of women in sport and the social process of gender equality in the Western world. The statements included in the “de Coubertin narrative” may have always been scandalous, but the novelty – indicating a possible weakening of the position of the representatives of this trend and their awareness of political correctness – seems to be that they are apologizing for their words and disassociating themselves from them. Ultimately, Winter says that Fischer denied his statement, while Garri Kasparov recently admitted:

I won’t hide from the fact that I did make regrettably sexist remarks about women in chess around this time. In that 1989 “Playboy” interview I said men were better at chess because “women are weaker fighters” and that “probably the answer is in the genes”. The possibility of gender brain differences aside, I find it almost hard to believe I said this considering that my mother is the toughest fighter I know (Kasparov 2017: 268).

By coming back to his statement less than thirty years ago, apologizing for it and withdrawing from it, Kasparov bears witness to a peculiar change not only in the individual perception of the phenomenon under discussion here, but also

in what can be appropriately expressed in contemporary sports discourse. In the 21st century, the position of women and men in chess is not equal, but it is generally accepted – also at the institutional level²⁴ – that one should strive for gender equality rather than justify and celebrate inequality.

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²⁴ One of the bodies of FIDE is Commission for Women’s Chess, which describes its mission as following: (1) to promote female chess throughout all FIDE member nations; (2) to support talented young female players; (3) to increase number of certified female organizers, arbiters and coaches; (4) to increase number of female lecturers (<https://wom.fide.com/mission/> – accessed 27.05.2020).

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KRÓLOWE W CIENIU KRÓLI – SOCJOLOGICZNE ZAPISKI O HISTORII DYSKRYMINACJI I EMANCYPACJI KOBIEŃ W SZACHACH

Abstrakt. Artykuł dotyczy nierównej pozycji kobiet i mężczyzn w szachach. Nierówność ta przejawia się obecnie w maskulinizacji rozgrywek szachowych, płciowo określonych różnicach w prezentowanym poziomie gry oraz w dyskryminacji finansowej. Analiza historyczna pokazuje, że szachy na przestrzeni wieków były uznawane za rozrywkę właściwą zarówno kobietom, jak i mężczyznom. Dopiero proces sportowej instytucjonalizacji szachów (i przekształcania ich w rozrywkę typu *serious leisure* w typologii R. Stebbinsa), który dokonał się w dobie kształtowania się społeczeństwa przemysłowego, przyniósł dyskryminację kobiet w szachach. Działania emancypacyjne kobiet na tym polu, datowane od drugiej połowy XIX wieku, były w prasie szachowej komentowane w dwojaki sposób, który został w tekście nazwany „narracją W. Steinitza” i „narracją P. de Coubertina”. Obie te perspektywy zachowały żywotność do dzisiaj, towarzysząc postępowi w zakresie zrównywania pozycji kobiet i mężczyzn w szachach, jaki przyniosły XX i XXI wiek.

Słowa kluczowe: szachy, sport, dyskryminacja kobiet w sporcie.