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Interview for the SheCOACH project

“We need to change how we define leadership in sports”: Greek coach Eleni Kapogianni on equal opportunities, visibility and driving change

Eleni Kapogianni

Eleni Kapogianni is a seasoned and highly respected Greek basketball coach with a distinguished career in elite women's basketball.

She has led several of Greece's top-tier clubs, including Olympiacos Piraeus and Panathinaikos A.O. Most notably, as Head Coach of Olympiacos Women's Basketball Team, she achieved multiple undefeated seasons, winning several Greek League titles and Greek Cups, and firmly establishing the team's dominance in national competitions.



She also brought competitive success and stability to Panathinaikos Women's Basketball Team, maintaining her reputation as one of the top coaches in the country.

Internationally, Kapogianni has expanded her impact by serving as the Head Coach of the Iran Women's National Basketball Team, where she has played a key role in modernizing the program, elevating competitive standards, and mentoring local athletes and staff. Her international coaching reflects not only technical excellence but also adaptability and cultural understanding.

In addition to her coaching career, Eleni Kapogianni is an active lecturer and educator, regularly contributing to coaching certification programs and seminars.



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What challenges do women coaches face compared to their male counterparts?

One of the main challenges women coaches face is simply being given equal opportunities. Even in women's sports, it's still common to see men holding the majority of leadership positions, including head coach roles. That imbalance can be discouraging and sends a subtle message that coaching is still seen as a male-dominated field.

There's also the added pressure of having to constantly prove yourself. As women, we often have to work twice as hard to gain the same level of recognition or respect, even when we bring qualities that are incredibly valuable to coaching—like resilience, empathy, and strong intuition. These are strengths that can really make a difference in building a cohesive, motivated team, but they're not always acknowledged in the same way.

Another important point is the lack of visible role models. When young women don't see others like them in coaching positions, it's harder for them to imagine themselves stepping into that role. That's why initiatives like She Coach are so important. They provide not just training and support, but also community—something that helps women feel empowered and capable of thriving in this space.

As the head coach of the Iran women's national team, I've seen firsthand how powerful it is when women are trusted with leadership. It's not just about strategy or skills—it's about creating a culture where athletes feel understood, supported, and inspired. I'm proud to be part of that change, and I hope to open more doors for the next generation of women in coaching.

What steps can be taken to encourage more women to pursue coaching careers?

I think the first step is simple—give women more real opportunities. If we want more women to become coaches, we need to see them in those roles. Visibility really matters. When you see someone like you succeeding, it makes you believe you can do it too.

Mentorship is also huge. Having someone to guide you, support you, and help you navigate the challenges makes a big difference. Programs like She Coach are great because they give women the tools and community they need to grow.

We also need to change how we define leadership in sports. Women bring so much to the table—empathy, resilience, strong instincts—and those qualities are powerful in a coaching environment. They should be recognized and valued just as much as tactics and strategy.

As head coach of the Iran women's national team, I've seen how meaningful it is when women are trusted in leadership roles. It's not just good for the team—it inspires the next generation to dream bigger.



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What inspired you to become a basketball coach, and did gender play a role in your journey?

Basketball has always been a huge part of my life. I started as a player in Sporting Athens, and had the honor of playing for the Greek national team when I was younger. That experience shaped so much of who I am —my mindset, my values, and my love for the game. So, coaching felt like a natural next step. It gave me a chance to stay connected to the sport I love, but in a way that allows me to give back, guide others, and be part of something bigger than myself.

As for gender —honestly, it was always there in the background. There weren't many women coaching when I started, and that can make you question whether there's really space for you in that world. But I was lucky to work in environments, where I was treated with respect and felt equal. That kind of support gave me the strength to keep going and to believe in my place on the sidelines, not just on the court.

Now, as head coach of the Iran women's national team, I see how important it is for women to be visible in these roles. I hope my journey shows that it is possible, and that more women will feel inspired to take their shot too.



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