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Interview for the SheCOACH project

Changing the Game: Italian Coach Francesca Zara on stereotypes, inclusive language, and women's empowerment

Francesca Zara

Former basketball player with a career full of experiences and successes in Italian and international basketball.

She played in prestigious teams in Italy, France, Russia and in the WNBA in Seattle in the United States. In Italy she won 5 championships, 5 Supercups, 2 Italian Cups, 2 Eurocups and won the Euroleague also winning the Russian championship with Spartak Moscow. With the National Team she collected 127 appearances, participating in the European Championships in 1999 and 2007, winning silver at the Mediterranean Games in 2001 and at the Universiade in Taegu in 2003.

After her career as a player, she began her coaching career, gaining significant experience both in Italy with women's Serie A teams and with the Italian national team as player development at the 2019 European Championships, and in the United States where she did an internship in a college in Wisconsin and as international coach in the NBA Summer League with the Detroit Pistons. Today she coaches in the women's Serie A and is part of the staff of the Italian national team "Green Team", making available to the new generations everything she has learned in years of high-level sport.



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

Women coaches face numerous challenges that their male counterparts often do not encounter. One of the most significant obstacles is the need to constantly prove their competence before being given opportunities. While male coaches are often assumed to be capable and deserving of leadership roles simply by virtue of their gender, women must work twice as hard to demonstrate their value. This implicit bias means that women are not judged solely on their skills and experience but also on their ability to overcome stereotypes and preconceived notions about leadership in sports.

Another major challenge is the lack of respect for women in coaching positions. Society still struggles to fully recognize female authority in sports, and this is reflected in the way women coaches are treated. Many faces unsolicited advice or criticism from people who have no real expertise in coaching, simply because they are women. There is an ingrained, often unconscious, assumption that men are naturally better leaders, which leads to women being undermined in their roles. Their decisions are questioned more frequently, and their authority is challenged in ways that male coaches rarely experience.

One striking example of this bias can be seen in the hiring practices within women's basketball. It is common for male coaches from men's teams to transition into coaching women's teams without anyone questioning their qualifications. There is an automatic assumption that if they were coaching men, they must be competent enough to coach women. However, the reverse is almost never true - women coaches are rarely given opportunities to coach men's teams, regardless of their credentials and experience.

This inequality is evident at the highest levels of competition. In Italy's Serie A1, the top tier of women's basketball, there is currently only one female head coach, highlighting the extreme disparity in leadership roles. The same trend is reflected at the national team level, where women are scarcely represented among head coaching positions. This lack of representation not only limits career opportunities for women in coaching but also reinforces the idea that leadership in sports is predominantly a male domain.

Women in coaching must navigate these barriers every day, fighting for recognition, authority, and the same opportunities that men receive by default. Overcoming these challenges requires systemic change, including greater support for women in leadership, intentional hiring practices that prioritize merit over gender biases, and a cultural shift in how authority and expertise are perceived in sports.

Have you ever faced discrimination or bias as a female coach? How did you handle it?

Yes, I have faced discrimination and bias as a female coach on multiple occasions. Unfortunately, these experiences are not isolated incidents but rather part of a pattern of gender bias in the world of sports.

One of the most implied but pervasive forms of discrimination is the language used in official documents and media reporting. In forms, reports, and articles, the term "allenatore" (coach, in the Italian masculine form) is used universally, with no recognition of the existence of female coaches.



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This may seem minor, but language shapes perception. When the default term is always masculine, it reinforces the idea that coaching is a male-dominated profession and that women in these roles are exceptions rather than the normality.

Beyond language, bias is evident in everyday interactions. For example, it is common for referees to assume that my male assistant coach is actually the head coach, simply because he is a man.

Furthermore, their approach toward me is often different. I have noticed that referees tend to speak to me in a condescending way, as if they feel the need to "educate" me rather than engage in a professional, equal discussion. This rarely happens to my male colleagues, who are treated with immediate respect and credibility.

There have been more evident disrespectful moments as well. In one game, while I was asking a referee for clarification on a call (something any coach has the right to do), the opposing male coach stepped out of his designated area and yelled at me to "shut up." I am certain that he would never have done this to a male coach. It was a clear attempt to diminish and silence me, a statement of dominance based not on expertise or authority, but on gender.

Even in training courses meant to educate and develop coaches, gender bias is deeply rooted. The majority of the teaching materials and discussions are focused on men's basketball, as if that is the only version of the game that truly matters. When we are asked to analyze a game, the videos provided are almost always from men's matches. This sends a clear message: the experiences, strategies, and challenges of women's basketball are considered secondary, even when the audience consists of female coaches working in the women's game.

Handling these situations requires great resilience. I have learned to keep myself confident, refusing to let these biases diminish my authority or expertise. I make it a point to correct assumptions when they arise, whether it's telling a referee that I am the head coach, challenging disrespectful behavior, or claiming for more inclusive approaches in coaching education. Most importantly, I strive to be a visible example for other women in sports, proving that we belong in these roles and that our knowledge and leadership are just as valuable as that of any male coach.

However, true change cannot rely only on individual efforts. The system needs to evolve, starting with more representation of women in leadership roles, increasing awareness of unconscious biases, and a shift in the way people perceive authority in coaching. Until then, women in sports will continue to face these challenges daily, but we will also continue to break barriers and demand the respect we deserve.

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

To encourage more women to pursue coaching careers, we need to create more opportunities and provide better support for female coaches. One important step is developing training programs and courses that focus specifically on women's basketball. Too often, coaching education is centered around men's basketball, with little attention given to the specific dynamics and challenges of the women's game. By offering courses designed for female coaches, with content that reflects their experiences and needs, we can help them feel more prepared and confident in their careers.



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Another key step is increasing opportunities for women to gain experience and advance in coaching. This means actively hiring and promoting female coaches at all levels, from youth teams to professional leagues. Clubs and federations should make a conscious effort to include more women in leadership roles, ensuring that they are given the same chances as men to prove their abilities. Seeing other women succeed in coaching roles can also inspire more young women to pursue this path.

It's also important to challenge the biases that discourage women from coaching. Society needs to stop assuming that coaching is a job for men and recognize that women are just as capable. This means changing the way people talk about coaching, using inclusive language, and making sure female coaches are respected and valued.

Finally, financial support and resources should be made available to help women build their coaching careers. It is necessary to align the salary gap giving the opportunity to consider coaching a real job as it is for men's coaches. By taking these steps, creating dedicated courses, opening up more job opportunities, fighting gender bias, and discarding the salary gap, we can encourage more women to enter coaching and build a future where female coaches are just as common and respected as male ones.

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

My passion for basketball and my desire to share my knowledge were the main reasons I became a coach. I wanted to use my experience to help players grow, not only as athletes but also as individuals. It has always been important to me to create opportunities for my players to develop their careers, giving them the tools, they need to succeed.

Another big motivation for me was the chance to contribute to changing the approach to coaching in women's basketball. Based on my own experience as a player, I saw areas where coaching could improve, especially in terms of communication and leadership. I strongly believe in a constructive approach, one that focuses on clear communication, trust, and creating a positive environment where players can develop freely and reach their full potential. My goal has always been to build a team culture that allows athletes to grow, both on and off the court.

I also want to promote a style of basketball that is exciting to watch. I believe that by emphasizing creativity, teamwork, and a dynamic style of play, we can make women's basketball more appealing to a wider audience. I want to help change the perception of the women's game and encourage more people to follow and support it.

Gender has definitely played a major role in my journey. If I had been a man with the same playing career, I would have had far more opportunities and financial rewards. Male athletes who transition into coaching often receive immediate trust and high-level opportunities, while women have to prove themselves over and over again. This inequality is frustrating, but it has also motivated me to push forward and work even harder to break barriers.

Ultimately, being a coach is not just about teaching basketball -it's about shaping the future of the sport. I hope that by being in this role, I can inspire other women to pursue coaching and show that they belong at the highest levels of the game.



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