

The war on women coaches

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During the past women's college basketball season, two prominent head coaches, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's Sylvia Hatchell and Georgia Tech's MaChelle Joseph, were fired.

In Joseph's case, her players had accused her of [being abusive](#), [demeaning and manipulative](#). Hatchell's players claimed she had [berated](#)

[them, made racially insensitive remarks and forced them to play through injuries.](#)

We don't want to litigate, refute or deny the claims against Hatchell, Joseph and countless other female coaches. But it's not difficult to imagine a male coach with a similar style being called "tough," "demanding" and "passionate."

As [social scientists](#) who study [coaching](#) and [leadership in sport](#), we're starting to see a double standard at play—one that holds female coaches to a different standard than their male counterparts.

We think it might help explain why the percentage of collegiate [women head](#) coaches is stagnant and near an all-time low.

Dwindling numbers over the decades

In 1972, [Title IX](#), a federal civil rights law which made gender discrimination in schools illegal, was passed. It led to record numbers of girls and women playing sports at all levels. But an unintended effect was that, over time, women started to hold a smaller share of sport leadership positions.

According to the [Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport](#) at the University of Minnesota, the percentage of female coaches [has steadily fallen](#) since the passage of Title IX. In 1972, more than 90% of female collegiate athletes were coached by women. Today that number hovers around 42% at the NCAA Division I level.

After Title IX required schools to allocate more resources for women's sports, male coaches started to see coaching female athletes as a legitimate career path. Today men occupy [nearly 75%](#) of all head coaching positions in collegiate athletics.

A shorter leash?

Hatchell and Joseph's experiences are not isolated ones.

In recent years, a number of collegiate women coaches have encountered challenges to their coaching behaviors, integrity, character and job security, some high profile, many not. In 2014, University of Minnesota-Duluth women's hockey head coach Shannon Miller [didn't have her contract renewed](#) despite multiple national championships, high graduation rates and no NCAA violations. Miller sued for gender discrimination [and won more than US\\$3 million in damages](#).

In the wake of allegations of abuse, a few female coaches have been able [to keep their jobs](#). Some win [court cases](#) against the [university](#). But many end up simply leaving their positions in the hopes of landing another coaching job at a different school.

Most of these women are [not rehired](#); if they are, it's not at the [same level](#) or [position](#). For example, Tracey Greisbaum, a highly successful former head field hockey coach at the University of Iowa, was fired after athlete allegations of harassment and mistreatment. She subsequently won a \$1.5 million lawsuit for [gender discrimination](#). But she's now a volunteer coach for Duke University.

Male coaches also get accused of abuse, and some do get fired, like Maryland college football coach D.J. Durkin, who was fired in October 2018 after one of his players died after practice.

But many that [exhibit behaviors](#) their female colleagues are fired for remain employed or quickly get hired for head coaching gigs at other schools. The most prominent example of the return to coaching is former Indiana men's basketball coach Bobby Knight, who was fired in 2000 [after choking a player in practice](#). In 2001, Knight was hired as the

head coach at Texas Tech.

On the women's side, University of Illinois head women's basketball coach Matt Bollant [was sued by players](#) who claimed he had created a racially abusive environment. Bollant was fired in 2017, [only to be quickly hired](#) as the head coach at Eastern Illinois University.

When women don't behave as expected

What might explain the differential treatment?

[Due to gender stereotypes](#), we expect women be more nurturing, caring, supportive and relationship-oriented. We expect men, on the other hand, to be assertive, independent and [dominant](#).

Then there are behaviors we expect each gender to avoid. For men, this includes signs of weakness, like insecurity or sensitivity. Women, on the other hand, aren't supposed to be aggressive or intimidating.

Studies show that when women exhibit dominant behavior or men appear to be weak, [people tend to react negatively](#).

But the backlash isn't evenly distributed: [Research has shown](#) that women who act in dominant and more masculine ways generate much stronger feelings of contempt, disgust, revulsion and disdain in others.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't

It's easy to see how these gender stereotypes can make things more difficult for female coaches.

Coaches are expected to be confident, demanding and assertive. Women

in head coaching roles are, not surprisingly, expected to act "like a coach."

But many of the behaviors expected of coaches also align with stereotypical male behaviors. So when women act like a coach, it violates traditional female [gender stereotypes](#), [subjecting them to backlash](#).

Another problem is that female college athletes seem to value coaches who act in dominant, sometimes [authoritarian ways](#). When female athletes are asked what they want in a coach, [they'll say](#) they want someone who is commanding, confident, assertive and knowledgeable.

At the same time, [female athletes](#) consider [ideal female coaches](#) to be caring, supportive and nurturing. But this contradicts [what they value in a coach](#).

Female coaches ultimately [find themselves in a double bind](#): They're damned if they act like men, and damned if they don't.

On March 30, Notre Dame head women's basketball [coach](#) Muffet McGraw [told Think Progress](#) that she would no longer hire men coaches for her staff. A few days later, when she was asked to elaborate on her stance, [she said](#), "Girls are socialized to know ... that gender roles are already set. Men run the world. Men have the power. Men make the decisions. It's always the men that [are] the stronger ones. When these girls are coming out, who are they looking up to telling them that that's not the way it has to be? And where better to do that than in sports?"

McGraw's impulse to hire more women is well-founded. But the issue goes beyond simply hiring more women. These women, once they're hired, need to be able to thrive in their jobs. Understanding how—and why—they're held to a different standard is an important step in

addressing the larger problem of inequality.

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