Gender Analysis of Italian Women’s Basketball Coaches and Staff in Serie A1

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Numerous scholars have examined the underrepresentation of women in the sport industry focusing on a variety of populations (Burton, 2014; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Maass, D’Ettole & Cadinu, 2008; Sagas, Cunningham & Teed, 2006; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Whisenant, 2008). Despite numbers showing that women now have greater opportunities to participate in sport worldwide (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Smith & Wrynn, 2013), there is still much work to be done in terms of leadership positions within the industry.

Researchers have consistently used the theory of homologous reproduction as a theoretical basis to explain the underrepresentation of women in sport (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Sagas et al., 2006; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Whisenant, 2008). Homologous reproduction is related to the concepts of homosociality and homosocial reproduction. According to Kanter (1993), homosocial reproduction refers to “selection of incumbents on the basis of social similarity” (p. 54) and homosociality to “having a homogeneous group of managers” (p. 296). In the context of this study, homosocial particularly means “the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex” (Lipman-Blumen, 1976, p. 16).

In the United States, Lapchick, Johnson & Yacaman (2014) examined racial and gender hiring practices in the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA). To expand this research, the current study seeks to determine if evidence of homologous reproduction exists at the coaching and staffing level in the top Italian women’s basketball league, Serie A1. Established in 1930, the league is currently composed of 14 teams (Lega Basket Femminile, 2015).

Data were collected through the official website of Serie A1 League (Lega Basket Femminile, 2015) during the 2014-2015 season. For all 14 teams, we recorded coaching and staffing job positions and the gender of each member as interpreted by the researchers based on first names and pictures. Since few teams had pictures of staff members online, we contacted teams directly via email and requested pictures. We performed frequency counts of gender by team and position and performed frequency distribution, a basic statistical technique that helps in organizing, summarizing, and interpreting data (Kalaian, 2008).

Results from this investigation indicate that men held the majority of the job positions in the league. In terms of total frequency and percentages, there are very few women in leadership positions in the Italian teams. Despite being the premiere women’s basketball league in the country, there were no women in head coaching positions and 22 out of 23 of all the assistant coaches were men as well. 94% of all the athletic trainers, 87% of all physicians and 75% of all statisticians in the league were men. Physiotherapist is the only job position in which percentage of women is bigger. Indeed, 33% of them were women.

Results suggest that homologous reproduction plays a role in the hiring practices of coaches and staff members in the Italian top women’s basketball league. Furthermore, the lack of job descriptions and the inconsistent use of job titles potentially represent an obstacle for people who do not already have connections within the industry and are seeking employment in Serie A1.

This research contributes to the body of scholarly work on gender issues in professional sport by exploring the representation of women in the coaching and staffing positions, specifically in the Italian basketball context. We conclude by providing suggestions for future research as well as practical implications.