Are all Coaches Treated the Same in the WNBA? Evidence of Gendered Treatment Discrimination

Nefertiti Walker, University of Massachusetts Amherst
David Berri, Southern Utah University

Management - Leadership (Professional Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2018-203
Friday, June 8, 2018 1:20 PM
Room: Acadia A

In examining women in leadership positions in sport, the conversation is often consumed with the lack of women in leadership positions in sport. In fact, much of Burton and Leberman (2017) book entitled, Women in Sport Leadership, focused on this very issue. Similarly, Burton (2015) multi-level review of women in leadership explains how macro-level factors such as institutionalized norms, meso-level factors such as stereotypes or discrimination, and micro-level factors such as occupational turnover intentions influence the lack of women in leadership positions. The sport industry, specifically sport media, has also noticed the lack of women in leadership positions.

The New York Times recently published an article on how the proportion of women coaching has steadily decreased over the last 45 years (Longman, 2017). The work of Acosta and Carpenter (2014) supports the previous notion by stating that in intercollegiate sport, men currently serve as head coach for 57.1% of women’s teams, while only 43.4% of women’s teams have women head coaches. Meanwhile, on the men’s side, women only occupy 2-3% of the head coaching positions. International sport seems to emulate intercollegiate sport. An ESPN article, in explaining the lack of women in leadership roles at the international level, describes the landscape as a “striking reflection of an exclusive men’s club that runs international federations affiliated with the Olympics as well as their related regional zone confederations and national federations” (Lapchick, 2017). To no surprise, professional sport suffers from a similar condition. The NBA is often considered the leader in diversity and inclusion initiatives, often hiring a higher proportion of women than most other American professional leagues. However, they also struggle with a lack of women in leadership. Only 36.1% of their professional administration roles are filled by women and the numbers shrink as we examine their advancement, with women only comprising 21% of team vice presidents, and seven percent of team presidents (Lapchick & Bullock, 2016). Similarly, in the WNBA, only 33% of CEO/president positions are held by women.

The purpose of this research is to examine the lack of women in leadership positions in the WNBA. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative design, we will examine the following research questions:

RQ1: With respect to the firing of coaches, are women and men treated the same?

RQ2: With respect to the hiring of coaches, is there any difference in the quality of teams each gender is given to coach?

RQ3: Do coaches perceive that gender impacts how coaches are treated?

The WNBA came into existence in 1997. Across the first 21 years of WNBA history there have been 58 different coaches who have coached at least one complete season in the league. Of these, 28 have been women while 30 have been men. To put that in perspective, there has never been a woman hired to be a head coach in the NBA.

In addition, there have been nine coaches who have at least ten years of experience in the WNBA. Of these, only two have been women. Of these nine coaches, all but one coached with multiple teams. All of this suggests that although men and women are given similar opportunities to coach in the WNBA, when it comes to longevity there is a bias in favor of men. To test whether or not a bias exists in the hiring and firing of coaches, we propose following the methodology laid forth in Holmes (2011). Holmes study looked at why coaches in college football involuntarily left their job due to on-field performance. As Holmes noted, such a study is possible in sports because the media reports why teams are changing coaches. The model we propose is a discrete hazard model where the dependent variable is whether or not a WNBA team fires a head coach for on-field performance. The list of independent...
variables will be as follows:

- winning percentage of the team last year
- historical winning percentage of the team
- historical winning percentage of the head coach
- gender of the general manager
- gender of the coach
- dummy variable equal to 1 if the coach has NBA playing experience
- dummy variable equal to 1 if the coach has WNBA playing experience

In addition to looking at why coaches are let go, we also wish to look at whether or not men and women are given the same quality of teams to coach. A presentation at the Western Economic Association and working paper by Cook, Price, and Berri (2010) indicated that African American coaches in the NBA were often given lower quality teams to lead than white coaches. Is a similar bias happening with women coaching in the WNBA?

Beyond addressing the issues of who is fired and what sort of team coaches are given when they are hired, we also propose to interview coaches and ask them about their perceptions of the role gender plays in hiring and firing decisions in the WNBA. Do the coaches believe gender matters? Or do they think WNBA teams do not generally consider gender in evaluating head coaches?

This study extends the research on women in coaching, by being the first to use a mixed method design of a complete professional team population. By examining the hiring practices for every WNBA team since the very first WNBA season, we provide the most robust assessment for the lack of women as head coaches in the WNBA. We are able to both provide generalized outcomes for the entire WNBA, as well as rich, descriptive storytelling of the experiences of WNBA coaches. This research should provoke organizational change in the WNBA. In American professional sports, the NBA (and its affiliates) is the only other professional basketball league. The NBA does not and has never had a woman as a permanent head coach. Therefore, the WNBA remains the lone opportunity for women to coach at this highest level. Further, with the evidence provided, it seems that the WNBA may be vulnerable to litigation. Future research should examine the legal ramifications of treatment discrimination in the WNBA.