

Investigating the Glass Cliff Phenomena in NCAA Division I Women's Basketball

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Abstract

There is an under-representation of women head coaches among intercollegiate sport teams. The most recent Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport Racial and Gender Report Card for College Sport reported that in the 2021-2022 season, women head coaches led only 42% of all women's Division I college sport teams (Lapchick, 2022). While the lack of women's leadership in college athletics is troublesome, women's basketball has been at the forefront of developing and retaining women head coaches. Legendary coaches like Pat Summit, Sylvia Hatchell, and Tara VanDerveer have helped pave the way for the acceptance of women head coaches. Most recently, Tara VanDerveer became the winningest coach in NCAA history. As a result, women's college basketball represents a sport with one of the highest percentages of women's head coaches. In the 2021-2022 season, women represented 66% of head coaching positions in women's college basketball (Lapchick, 2022). While women head coaches are well represented in women's college basketball, Gerretsen et al. (2023) suggest there are still inconsistencies with hiring practices and gender perceptions in women's college basketball, as their study found women held more robust qualifications for head coaching roles in comparison to their male head coaching counterparts. To further understand the coaching landscape in women's college basketball, this study focuses on the implications of gender in coaching turnover.

This study utilized role congruity theory (RCT) and the glass cliff phenomenon to investigate coaching turnover. RCT states that women who attain in-congruent gender-typed leadership positions will face barrier discrimination in acquiring and performing leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The glass cliff phenomenon argues that women are appointed to more precarious leadership positions with a higher rate of failure than their male counterparts (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Wicker et al. (2019) utilized this theory to investigate women's college soccer head coaching positions, with results indicating that the glass cliff may be the reason for the low number of female leaders in the field. Further, LaVoi and Silva Breen (2022) found that male head coaches were more likely to be hired when they replaced a male, regardless of positive or negative coaching turnover. This disparity in gender equity deserves to be further studied to explain the hiring practices and trends of women's college basketball coaches.

This study aims to investigate the RCT and the glass cliff phenomenon in NCAA Division I women's basketball. Specifically, this study examined whether women are filling head coaching positions for less successful programs, how season performance affects the dismissal of female head coaches compared to their male counterparts, and who is more likely to be hired for open head coaching positions. Secondary data collection compiled team performance and head coach gender data for all Division I women's basketball teams (n=361) between the 2005-06 and 2022-2023 seasons, resulting in 6,205 observations.

Logistic regression analysis indicated no significant difference between the gender of head coach and coach turnover, while a lower winning percentage indicated coaching turnover. Women head coaches are hired approximately 70% of the time when a coaching change occurs, showing no support for role congruity theory. However, the results did support a glass cliff for women head coaches. For example, a female head coach was significantly more likely to be hired for a poorly performing team. When looking at success (win percentage), successful female head coaches were more likely to have a female replacement, and poorly performing female head coaches would be replaced with a male head coach. This suggests that once women have demonstrated the ability to be successful in a head coaching position, the perceptions of quality women's leadership are embraced. Still, when a female head coach is unsuccessful, the 'male savior' aspect of the glass cliff emerges as evident. Interestingly, when controlling for win percentage, a male head coach is more likely to be hired for replacement when a female head coach leaves a program. Lastly, the results indicated that a male head coach was more likely to be hired in the Power 6 conferences (ACC, Big 10, Big XII, Big East, Pac-12, and SEC), suggesting males are more likely to attain higher-paying and more well-resourced positions in women's college basketball. While the results are positive that women are most likely (70%) to be hired for a vacant head coaching position, these results do suggest that gender stereotypes for women head coaches still exist. These results should further the understanding of coaching turnover and show support for further exploration of the glass cliff phenomenon in college athletics.