



# Getting on top of the glass cliff: Reviewing a decade of evidence, explanations, and impact



Michelle K. Ryan<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, S. Alexander Haslam<sup>c</sup>, Thekla Morgenroth<sup>a</sup>, Floor Rink<sup>b</sup>, Janka Stoker<sup>b</sup>, Kim Peters<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Exeter, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> University of Queensland, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The glass cliff refers to the tendency for women to be more likely than men to be appointed to leadership positions that are risky and precarious. This paper reviews the first decade of research into the phenomenon and has three key aims: (a) to summarize and integrate evidence of the glass cliff, (b) to clarify the processes that have been shown to underlie the glass cliff, and (c) to explore the factors that may moderate the glass cliff phenomenon. We show that the glass cliff has had a significant impact on public discourse around women and leadership but is a complex, contextual, and multiply determined phenomenon.

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While society in general has made great gains in women's participation in social, political, and employment spheres, women's representation in positions of power and influence has been notably less impressive (Catalyst, 2014; United Nations, 2015). Nonetheless, there are increasing numbers of women who do manage to break through the glass ceiling and occupy top-level leadership positions (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, research suggests that these successful women are likely to be disproportionately represented in leadership positions that are risky and precarious, a phenomenon known as the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). This paper provides an overview of the first decade of research on the glass cliff and has three key aims: (a) to summarize and integrate evidence of the glass cliff phenomenon, (b) to clarify the processes that have been shown to underlie the glass cliff, and (c) to explore the factors that may moderate the glass cliff phenomenon. We show that the glass cliff has had a significant impact on public discourse around women and leadership but nevertheless is a complex, contextual, and multiply determined phenomenon.

## Uncovering the glass cliff

Women's participation in social life is greater than ever before, with women undertaking paid work and occupying middle-management positions at unprecedented levels (Catalyst, 2014; United Nations, 2015) and engaging in the political process at

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Perry Rd, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX4 4QG, UK.  
E-mail address: [m.ryan@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:m.ryan@exeter.ac.uk) (M.K. Ryan).

equal (or often better) rates than men (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). However, it appears that a final male bastion remains – those positions of at the pinnacle of power, influence, and leadership. Women comprise only 22% of national parliamentarians (United Nations, 2015), only 18% small-to-medium business CEOs (or equivalent) in the UK (BIS, 2013), and only 16.9% of Fortune 500 corporate board members and 5.2% of CEOs in the US (Catalyst, 2014). Importantly, while in the final decades of the 20th Century we saw reasonably dramatic gains towards gender equality, of late, the representation of women in senior organizational ranks has stagnated, and in some situations even declined (e.g. Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Davidson & Burke, 2012; Vinnicombe, Doldor, & Turner, 2015).

However, while women remain stubbornly under-represented at the top, they are not entirely absent from leadership roles. One way in which to understand both women's gains and this statistical stagnation is to examine the types of positions women tend to occupy once they do break through the glass ceiling. Once one does, it is apparent that the experiences of male and female leaders often differ greatly. Speaking to some key quantitative dimensions of difference, research suggests that while employees are becoming more positive about the effectiveness of female leaders (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014), compared to men, women are less likely (a) to hold positions with authority, (b) to have opportunity for promotion, (c) to be rewarded in their roles, and (d) to be part of networks and support systems (Lyness & Thompson, 1997, 2000). Unsurprisingly, given these findings, women are more likely to face barriers to progression and tend also to receive lower remuneration than their male counterparts (e.g. Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011; O'Reilly, Smith, Deakin, & Burcell, 2015).

Insight into the qualitative differences in men and women's leadership positions is provided by research into the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). In direct response to an article in the *The Times* (UK) arguing that “the triumphant march of women into the country's boardrooms ha[d]... wreaked havoc on companies' performance” (p.21), Ryan, Haslam, and colleagues embarked on a program of research seeking to explore the opposite causal pathway: seeking to establish whether poor company performance might instead trigger women's appointment to leadership positions. The metaphor of the glass cliff captures the increased risk of negative consequences in such circumstances – speaking both to women's seniority (through the allusion to height) and to the precariousness of their roles as they teeter on the edge.

### Initial evidence for the glass cliff: Investigating causality

Initial evidence for the glass cliff emerged from an archival study conducted by Ryan and Haslam (2005). This examined the same window of data reported in the original article from *The Times*, investigating changes in monthly share price of FTSE 100 companies on the London Stock Exchange, both directly before and directly after the appointment of male or female board members. The results revealed that, in time of a general stock market downturn, the appointment of a woman to the board did not lead to a subsequent drop in company performance. More noteworthy, however, were fluctuations in share prices leading up to board appointments. On the one hand, prior to the appointment of men, companies typically experienced reasonably stable performance. On the other hand, and in sharp contrast, in the five months prior to the appointment of a woman, companies tended to experience consistently poor share price performance.

The results of this analysis scotch the claim that female leaders cause poor company performance. Instead, they point to a more nuanced story, suggesting that, in times of poor company performance, women may have a “leadership advantage” (Eagly & Carli, 2003). This indeed, may be one reason why – in the wake of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) – more women have secured more top positions in recent years.

However, there are multiple dimensions to the glass cliff. First, crises (with their inevitable uncertainty) have been shown to facilitate risk-taking (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) allowing organizations to try something new or to question the status quo (Boin & Hart, 2003). Such crisis situations may therefore open up previously unavailable opportunities for women take on leadership positions. Moreover, it may also be the case that women are seen to have particular skills and traits that make them particularly suited to dealing with these situations (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

But the precariousness of the glass cliff may also help to explain the stagnation in rates of change if women are less likely to succeed and thrive in such positions. Research into the “romance of leadership” (e.g., Meindl, 1995; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) suggests that observers are more likely to blame leaders themselves for poor organizational performance than they are to blame situational factors. Consonant with this, there is also evidence that organizations in crisis experience high levels of leadership turnover (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Such outcomes can also have knock-on consequences for a person's career prospects – with research indicating that leaders of poorly performing companies are less likely to be appointed to leadership positions in the future (e.g. Fama & Jensen, 1983; Ferris, Jagannathan, & Pritchard, 2003).

Moreover, blame for leadership failure is likely to be both visible and public. In times of crisis, organizations and their leadership teams are likely to be placed under high scrutiny and pressure both from stakeholders and the media (e.g. Boin, tHart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008). This scrutiny may be particularly harsh in glass cliff positions, because the co-occurrence of two relatively rare events – a crisis and the appointment of a female leader – may motivate observers with particular identity concerns to hone in on the correlation between the two (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Schaller & Maass, 1989, as seen clearly in the original *Times* article). And on top of all this, research demonstrates that non-prototypical leaders tend to be punished more for mistakes than prototypical leaders (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010).

### Further evidence for the glass cliff

Initial research identified the presence of a glass cliff within a relatively small sample of UK boards of directors within a limited time period. This was important to refute a very specific set of claims about causality, but an obvious question was whether the

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