



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



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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

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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

pattern of findings we had identified would be replicated more widely. Subsequent archival analysis has demonstrated that glass cliff appointments are not restricted to corporate board positions in the UK's largest companies. For example, archival analysis of US Fortune 500 firms revealed that those companies that had experienced a scandal in recent years were more likely to have female executives on their boards (Brady, Isaacs, Reeves, Burroway, & Reynolds, 2011). Similarly, Cook and Glass (2014a) examined Fortune 500 companies from 1996 to 2000 and found that weakly performing firms were more likely to promote women to CEO positions than they were to promote White men.

Glass cliff positions have also been demonstrated outside of the corporate sphere. For example, as yet unpublished work by Smith (2014) explores the circumstances under which women secure leadership positions in public organizations. Within a sample of local school districts they found that women were more likely than men to occupy leadership positions when the risk of failure was higher. Similarly, Smith and Monaghan (2013) examined US Federal regulatory organizations, and found that, when they had low to moderate visibility, agencies facing higher risk of failure had more women in leadership positions.

Within the political sphere, archival analysis of the 2005 UK general election also demonstrated the precariousness of women's leadership positions (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010). Here, within the Conservative party, women won significantly fewer votes than their male counterparts. However, this discrepancy in performance was completely explained by the fact that female candidates contested seats that were significantly more difficult to win because the candidate they were competing against had won a higher proportion of votes at the previous election.

The glass cliff has also been shown to extend beyond gender to other minority groups, such as those based on race and ethnicity. Having demonstrated that women may face a political glass cliff, we investigated whether Black and ethnic minority (BME) groups, who are also significantly under-represented in politics, may face a comparable disadvantage. In an analysis of the past three UK General Elections (from 2001 to 2010), Kulich, Ryan, and Haslam (2014) demonstrated that, again within the Conservative Party, individuals from BME backgrounds also confronted glass cliffs. Again this meant that their lack of success could be fully explained by the fact that, compared to White candidates, the candidates they confronted had previously secured a higher proportion of the vote.

Similar findings have been observed within both the business and the sporting realm. In an analysis of Fortune 500 companies over a 15-year window Cook and Glass (2014a) demonstrated that, compared to White men, members of occupational minorities (i.e., Black men and Black and White women) are more likely to be promoted to CEO positions in firms that are experiencing a decline in performance. Cook and Glass (2013) also uncovered a glass cliff for ethnic minorities in a sporting context after examining the promotions of US College men's basketball coaches over a 30-year period. Compared to White coaches, they found that ethnic minority coaches were more likely to be appointed as head coaches to teams with a history of losses in the previous year.

### Media engagement with the glass cliff

Since it was first identified, the glass cliff has attracted considerable interest outside academia. In the first reports on the phenomenon it was common for media coverage to illustrate key research findings by elaborating on the career histories of women who had faced glass cliffs. Early examples were Carly Fiorina, appointed CEO of Hewlett Packard as the Tech bubble burst and Margaret Thatcher who faced a series of crises in her rise through UK politics.

This focus has become more pronounced in recent years — buoyed by the large number of cases thrown up by the GFC. For example, at the onset of the GFC and not long after her appointment as Chief Financial Officer (the first woman to ever sit on their executive committee) Erin Callan became Lehman Brothers' company spokesperson, but she resigned soon afterwards and the company declared bankruptcy three months later. A few years later Jill Abramson became the first female chief editor of the *New York Times* in the face of declining advertising revenues and uncertainty in relation to digital technologies. Like many of her male counterparts, Abramson introduced substantial staff redundancies in a drive to improve profits, but met extremely strong criticism and was fired. More recently, Mary Barra was appointed CEO of General Motors (the first woman to lead a global automobile company) only weeks before it announced the recall of 1.6 million cars due to electrical faults allegedly linked to 13 deaths. Other widely discussed examples include Marissa Mayer, appointed CEO of a declining Yahoo; Julia Pierson, short-lived Director of the US secret service; and Anne Mulcahy, appointed Xerox CEO when the company was close to bankruptcy and as their accountancy practices were under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission.

With sample sizes of one, these various anecdotal examples clearly lack the empirical rigor of academic research. Moreover, their engagement with the nuances of the academic literature is often very limited and their capacity to resolve points of controversy is negligible (despite the fact that they are routinely invoked for this purpose). Nevertheless, they have served to capture the imagination of the media and to bring the glass cliff — and broader issues of gender and leadership — to the attention of the public. Importantly too, in this context the metaphor of the glass cliff provides commentators with an alternative narrative of women and leadership that draws attention to the types of positions women occupy rather than simply blaming them for poor outcomes that are set in train long before their appointment.

### Making sense of mixed evidence: The glass cliff as phenomenon rather than theory

While the existence of the glass cliff has been endorsed empirically and anecdotally, support is not unequivocal. For example, Adams, Gupta, and Leeth (2009) examined US Fortune 500 companies and found no evidence of gender differences in CEO appointments when looking at objective, accountancy-based measures of company performance, such as return on equity and return on assets. In an examination of Fortune 500 over a 20-year window, Cook and Glass (2014b) found that decision-maker diversity,

and not firm performance, predicted women's promotion to CEO positions (although see [Cook & Glass, 2014a](#), for evidence supporting the glass cliff). [Santen and Donker \(2009\)](#) examined companies on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange between 1993 and 2003 and found no relationship between companies in financial distress and the appointment of women to positions as either CEOs or as non-executive board members (although it should be noted that the number of women in this sample was very small). Similarly, as yet unpublished work by [Hennessey, MacDonald, and Carroll \(2013\)](#) found no evidence for the glass cliff in Canadian board of director appointments. Moreover, the “file-drawer” phenomenon suggests that there are likely to be an even greater number of studies with non-significant results that have not been published ([Rosenthal, 1979](#)).

Research on the glass cliff began as an attempt to explain why, in a very particular context (the FTSE 100 in 2003), women in leadership positions were associated with poor company performance. As we have seen, the research supported a particular causal analysis, that poor company performance led to the appointment of women to the board ([Ryan & Haslam, 2005](#)). Moreover, further research has indicated that rather than being a one-off occurrence, a similar pattern could be seen for other types of crises. This body of evidence has led some researchers and social commentators alike to reference the “glass cliff theory”, and thus to evaluate evidence as either supporting (or even “proving”) the theory or, of course, not supporting (or disproving) the theory.

However, as we see it, the glass cliff is not *theory* in any definitional sense. In particular, if we define a theory as a system of explanation used to make sense of, and integrate, a number of empirical findings – and where the explanation is independent of the thing to be explained – then clearly the term is not applicable here. Not least, this is because the glass cliff is itself very much the thing to be explained. Accordingly, we see the glass cliff as a *phenomenon* that is either observed or not, rather than proved or disproved.

What we can do, however, is apply theory (and previous evidence) to help us understand and explain the processes underlying the phenomenon. Indeed, the somewhat mixed nature of available evidence suggests that the glass cliff is a nuanced and context-dependent phenomenon. So rather than disproving the glass cliff, disconfirming evidence serves to raise important questions about when and where the glass cliff is likely to materialize.

In this regard, archival research suggests that manifestations of the glass cliff are contingent on a number of factors. For example, [Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski, and Atkins \(2010\)](#), examined FTSE 100 companies between 2001 and 2005, distinguishing between accountancy-based of company performance (return on assets and return on equity) and a stock-based measure (Tobin's Q). Consistent with [Adams et al. \(2009\)](#) findings, there was no relationship between women's presence on boards of directors and accountancy-based measures of performance. However, speaking to the existence of a glass cliff, there was a significant negative relationship between women's presence on boards of directors and stock-based company performance, such that those companies with no women on their boards were overvalued relative to those with at least one woman on their board. We can reconcile these seemingly inconsistent results by recognizing the difference between investor perceptions (included in the more subjective stock-based measure) and more objective measures of company performance. Sensitivity to this difference suggests that the glass cliff is contingent on the ways in which organizational performance is indexed, and that perceptions are critical to its phenomenology.

Other archival research also points to contingencies in the emergence of the glass cliff. For example, unpublished work by [Morgenroth and Wegge \(2015\)](#) examined the relationship between company performance and the appointment of women to the boards of German companies. Here again there was no relationship between accountancy-based measures of company performance and the appointment of a woman the following year. There was, however, a negative relationship between stock-based measure of company performance and the appointment of women in the following year, but only for Germany's biggest companies (the DAX), or for smaller companies in select years. Similarly, [Mulcahy and Linehan \(2014\)](#) examined a sample of loss-making companies listed on the UK stock exchange. Providing partial support for the existence of a glass cliff, this showed that loss-making companies subsequently had increased gender diversity on their boards, but that this only occurred when the loss was ‘big’.

### Why is there a glass cliff? Exploring underlying processes

Having established that the glass cliff is a real and reasonably pervasive phenomenon, the next obvious task for researchers has been to try to understand its origins. However, because it is not always possible to shed light on these origins using archival methods, this task has required researchers to embrace an array of research methods. In this section we provide an overview of research that has examined an array of processes that are plausibly implicated in the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions. These include selection bias, gender and leadership stereotypes, organizational need for change, and the structure of women's preferences and opportunities.

#### Selection bias

One key question that arises from the initial literature on the glass cliff is whether women are preferentially selected by others to be leaders in times of crisis. To answer this question we conducted a number of experimental studies to investigate people's hiring decisions under conditions of varying company performance (e.g., [Ashby, Ryan & Haslam, 2007](#); [Haslam & Ryan, 2008](#)).

In these studies, participants are typically asked to read a scenario involving an organization that is either performing well or performing badly. They are then given details of a vacant leadership position within the organization and asked either to rank or evaluate the suitability of male and female candidates for the position. For example, in an initial experimental study, we asked participants to read a fictitious scenario about a leadership position in a company that had experienced either improving or



declining performance in recent years (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 1). Participants were then presented with brief CVs of three candidates, a male and a female candidate who were equally qualified for the position and matched on all relevant dimensions (with CVs counterbalanced between participants) and one less-qualified male candidate who had been included to increase the realism of the scenario. The study revealed that when the company had been performing well, the two well-qualified candidates were ranked equally overall. However, when the company was in decline, participants showed an overwhelming preference for the female candidate.

A subsequent study with business leaders explored perceptions of men's and women's suitability for a leadership position in a company that was performing well or performing poorly (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 3). Here participants evaluated a single candidate, either a man or a woman (again equally qualified for the position). When the company was doing well, participants considered the leadership ability and suitability of the candidates to be equal. However, when company performance was declining, participants evaluated the female candidate more positively than the male candidate.

In neither of these studies did participant gender impact on preferences or evaluations – with both male and female participants favoring the female candidate when company performance was poor. However, other studies have suggested that participant gender can sometimes play a role in such evaluations. Hunt-Early (2012) presented participants with a scenario in which they were asked to evaluate male and female candidates for a leadership position in a company that was either performing well or performing badly. Overall, the results were consistent with the glass cliff, demonstrating a preference for the female candidate when performance was poor. However, when participant gender was taken into account, male participants tended to favor the male candidate when all was well, but showed no gender preference when things were going badly. In contrast, female participants consistently favored the female candidate, but did so more strongly when performance was poor.

Just as archival research shows that the glass cliff can be found in contexts beyond the sphere of business, experimental research also finds evidence of glass cliff-producing selection bias across a range of situations. These include voters choosing a female politician to contest a by-election in a hard-to-win constituency (Ryan et al., 2010, Study 2), secondary school students preferring a female youth representative for a music festival (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 2), and lawyers assigning a risky and highly criticized legal case to a female lawyer (Ashby, Ryan & Haslam, 2007; see also Brown, Diekmann, & Schneider, 2011).

### **Stereotypes and implicit theories of leadership and gender: Think crisis–think female**

Evidence that the phenomenon of the glass cliff might, at least in part, be due to selection bias, raises secondary questions about the processes underlying these selection decisions. One potential contributory factor – that has consistently been shown to underlie gender discrimination in the workplace more broadly – pertains to gendered beliefs about (a) women and men and (b) leadership. Regarding the former, women tend to be perceived as communal (e.g., being warm, good-natured, understanding, and caring), while men tend to be perceived as agentic (e.g., being competent, independent, competitive, and confident; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Importantly, stereotypically masculine traits are remarkably similar to our stereotypical beliefs about good leadership, while stereotypically feminine traits are not. This phenomenon, known as the “think manager–think male” association (Schein, 1973), has both a descriptive and a prescriptive element and can lead to two distinct outcomes. First, compared to women, men tend to be judged as more suitable for leadership positions, and, second, women who do take on leadership positions are judged less favorably than men – having their performance devalued, failing to receive credit for their successes, or being penalized for being competent (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

However, research suggests that the association between masculinity and effective leadership is attenuated in times of crisis (e.g., Pillai, 1996), opening up the possibility that women's perceived communality – an attribute that is in demand when it comes to dealing with crisis – may contribute to the glass cliff. Indeed, Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, and Bongiorno (2011, Study 2) found that prescriptive stereotypes about the qualities that managers of unsuccessful companies *should* have, were much more strongly associated with stereotypically female attributes than with stereotypically male attributes. Clearly, this “think crisis – think-female” association could help explain why women tend to be preferred for leadership positions when organizations are in difficulty.

Experimental research provides some support for these ideas. In particular, Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010, Study 2) provided participants with a scenario in which they described a leadership position in either a successful company or a company in crisis. Participants rated a male and a female candidate in terms of stereotypically masculine characteristics associated with the think manager–think male stereotype (e.g., independence, decisiveness) and stereotypically feminine characteristics associated with the think crisis–think female stereotype (e.g., communication skills, ability to encourage others). In the context of a successful company, participants were more likely to choose the male candidate, and, at least in part, this was because he was described as more stereotypically masculine. On the other hand, in the context of a company in crisis, participants were more likely to choose the female candidate, and this was because, at least in part, she was described as more stereotypically feminine.

Along related lines, Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka, and Aritzeta (2012) asked participants to evaluate male and female candidates for a leadership position within a company facing a crisis, with each candidate described as either stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine. In line with other experimental evidence, results revealed a clear preference for female leaders. However, over and above this effect for candidate gender, there was also an overall preference for candidates who were stereotypically feminine.

## Strategic need for organizational change

There is evidence that suggests that the glass cliff phenomenon may also occur as organizations strategically move away from standard leadership practices in times of crisis — appointing a non-prototypical leader as a signal to stakeholders that they are undertaking change (Kaplan & Minton, 1994; Lee & James, 2007). Consistent with this idea, experimental research has shown that manipulating an organization's history of leadership can impact on the glass cliff. Specifically, Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010, Study 1) demonstrated that the tendency to prefer to appoint women to leadership positions in a time of crisis was contingent on an organization having a history of male leadership. Where the company had a history of female leadership, there was no preference for female leaders.

Brown et al. (2011) found further evidence for this pattern. In their first study, they manipulated the salience of threat (e.g., by priming this through word-completion tasks) and found that this led participants to prefer change over stability. In a second study implicit associations were also observed to link women with change and men with stability. Furthermore, while control participants favored a man over a woman for a leadership position, exposure to a threat manipulation led either to the attenuation of this preference (Study 3) or to its reversal (Study 4). Together, these studies suggest that, to the extent that organizational crises are threatening to decision-makers, the experience of threat may promote a desire for change and hence a preference for female leaders.

## Women's choices

Up until this point we have focused on the processes that may influence decision makers — either those involved in leader selection or those involved in formulating organizational strategy. However, it has also been suggested that the glass cliff could be due, at least in part, to the preferences and decisions of women themselves. For example, Patricia Peter, Head of Corporate Governance at the British Institute of Directors has argued, “I know of women who don't want to sit on a board that isn't a challenge, and who feel that if they go to a company that's doing quite well, they might not be noticed” (Woods, 2004, p. 1). At the same time it is also the case that women may be more willing than men to accept leadership positions in times of crisis because they have relatively few opportunities to reach the top; after all, beggars can't be choosers.

In line with this suggestion, research by Ashby, Ryan, and Haslam (2007) found that when participants were asked to choose between candidates for a risky leadership position (leading a legal case that was very likely to fail) their perceptions of opportunity were dependent on the gender of the candidate they chose. Here, a high-risk position was seen as providing a much better opportunity for the female candidate than her male counterpart. Moreover, those participants who chose the male candidate in a time of crisis (a minority of participants), recognized the increased risk associated with the crisis, but those who chose the female candidate did not.

Yet despite the very particular types of ‘opportunity’ that challenging leadership positions offer women, empirical research provides very little support that's women's own preferences and choices can explain the existence of glass cliffs. Indeed, experimental work by Rink, Ryan, and Stoker (2012) found that women generally regard risky leadership positions as *less* attractive than do men and are less likely to say that they would accept such positions. However, it remains possible that these perceptions of desirability are tempered by availability — so that cognitive dissonance leads risky leadership positions to become more attractive once women discover that they are the main option that is open to them.

## When is there a glass cliff? Exploring moderators

Given the diversity of the research reviewed above it would appear that the glass cliff does not arise from a single underlying process, but rather is due to a myriad of factors including selection bias, organizational strategy, and stereotypic beliefs about the nature of gender and leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Moreover, the fact that the phenomenon is multiply determined helps to explain why it is observed in some circumstances but not in others. However, there is further research that speaks directly to this issue by shedding light on the factors that determine when exactly glass cliffs are most likely to materialize.

These include the nature of the crisis situation, the availability of financial and social resources, and individual differences between decision makers.

## The nature of crisis

Organizational crises do not come in a single form but in a multiplicity of guises. These include deteriorating financial performance, technical failure, accidents and incidents, scandal, or changes in organizational and market dynamics (e.g., Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). There are also many ways in which a leader may, or may be expected to, respond to such crises (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008).

Continuing our research into the role that the think crisis–think female association plays in the glass cliff, we conducted an experiment where we not only described a company in crisis but also provided participants with a description of what would be required from the leader at this time (Ryan et al., 2011, Study 3). Here it was suggested that the leader was expected either (a) to stay in the background and endure the crisis, (b) to take responsibility for the inevitable failure (i.e., to act as a scapegoat), (c) to manage people and personnel issues through the crisis, (d) to be a spokesperson providing damage control, or (e) to take control and improve company performance. Participants then rated both stereotypically male and stereotypically female

characteristics in terms of their desirability in this situation. The think crisis–think female association was found only when the leader was expected to endure the crisis, to act as a scapegoat, or, most acutely, to need to manage people through the crisis. When leaders had to act as a spokesperson for the organization or to improve company performance, the think crisis–think female association was no longer apparent and masculine and feminine stereotyped traits were considered equally desirable. This evidence of variability in the strength of the think crisis–think female association across leadership contexts suggest that women are appointed to glass cliff positions not simply because they are thought to be able to turn things around, but rather because they are perceived to make good scapegoats or, more charitably, because they are perceived to have the appropriate skills to handle staffing issues that are likely to arise in times of crisis.

### **The availability of support**

Research also suggests that not all crisis situations are equally precarious, and that the perceived availability of support and resources plays an important role in the emergence of glass cliffs. In two studies, [Rink, Ryan, and Stoker \(2013\)](#) presented participants with a scenario describing an organization in crisis and asked them to evaluate the suitability of male and female leaders to lead the organization through the crisis. They were told that the leader either could or could not count on the support and confidence of relevant stakeholders and the larger organizational network. Across both studies, we found that where support and resources were absent the female leader was expected to be more effective than a male leader. Thus conditions for a glass cliff were only created when the leader was going to be confronting organizational challenges alone.

Additional data indicated that the woman was selected for the leadership role under these circumstances because participants expected that she would be better at gaining acceptance within the organization. However, where social resources were available to the leader, participants reverted to the more traditional gendered assumption that a leader who was male would be more effective than one who was female. Moreover, Study 2 demonstrated that participants only recognized the precariousness of an organization in crisis when social resources were absent (and the female leader was preferred), suggesting that leading in a time of crisis is recognized as being less risky when social resources are available to help those in charge to handle the flak.

### **Characteristics of decision makers**

Finally, researchers have also found some evidence that the appointment of women to glass cliff positions may be contingent on decision makers' individual differences. In particular, [Brown et al. \(2011, Study 4\)](#) found that the tendency to prefer female leaders under conditions of threat was evident only for those participants who strongly legitimized the current socio-political system – that is, those who had a strong social dominance orientation ([Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994](#)) and who favored system justification ([Kay & Jost, 2003](#)).

Such findings suggest that appointing a female leader in times of crisis is driven not by a desire for social change but rather by a desire to maintain the status quo (which can be a group-level as well as an individual difference; e.g., [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)). In many ways this makes sense, since, as we have argued, the increased likelihood of failure that accompanies appointment to glass cliff positions can be expected to set back rather than progress women's cause (at least in the short term). At the same time, the particular attraction of creating glass cliffs is that these can be trumpeted as progress at the same time that they stymie it.

### **How do people react to the glass cliff? Exploring responses**

Now that we have some understanding of the evidence base for the glass cliff and of the factors that might both underlie the phenomenon and impact on its occurrence, it is useful to think about how one might respond to the phenomenon. Indeed, if one is motivated to try to address the problems that the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions creates, it may be useful to start by trying to examine how people react to the phenomenon itself.

Two studies have been conducted to examine how individuals respond to the glass cliff. In a first study we examined how members of the public spontaneously explained the glass cliff after reading the online article in which it was first described ([Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007](#)). These explanations were coded, blind to participant gender, into nine categories, ranging from those that were relatively benign (e.g., women are suited to difficult leadership tasks) to those that were more malign (e.g., outright sexism or women's expendability in the workplace). Explanations also differed in the degree to which they saw the phenomenon to arise from processes that were unintentional (e.g., a lack of leadership opportunities for women) to those that were more intentional (e.g., ingroup bias).

Importantly, this first study found clear gender differences in the types of explanations that respondents generated. Women tended to explain the phenomenon in terms of malign processes such as a lack of alternative opportunities, sexism, or ingroup favoritism. In this way, they tended to acknowledge the existence of the glass cliff and to recognize its danger, unfairness, and prevalence. In contrast, men were more likely to generate benign explanations, such as women's suitability for difficult leadership tasks, the need for strategic decision making, or company factors unrelated to gender. Furthermore, men were much more likely to question the existence of the phenomenon (over 50% queried the research) and to downplay its significance and potential risks.

One obvious limitation of this study was that it involved a self-selected online sample – who may obviously have had particular motivations for sharing their opinions with glass cliff researchers. To address this concern, [Ryan, Haslam, and Bellenca \(2015\)](#) conducted a follow-up study in which working participants indicated their agreement with malign, benign, and denialist explanations for the glass cliff. Results replicated the previously observed gender differences in the types of explanations that were

supported — with men being more likely to support benign explanations than malign ones and also being more likely to deny the phenomenon than to explain it. In contrast, women were much less likely to deny the phenomenon, and were equally inclined to support both malign and benign explanations.

However, these gender differences were also dependent on respondents' seniority. This meant that the largest gender differences occurred for junior and intermediate participants. At the most senior level, women's responses were much more similar to those of men, in that they were more likely to deny the phenomenon or to endorse benign explanations. Such patterns accord with findings from a body of previous work which suggest that the women who make it to the top of (male-dominated) organizations tend to be relatively similar to their male counterparts and hence not to be the most passionate advocates for women's causes — either because they have been selected on this basis or have accommodated to the perceived ideological requirements of their role (Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, & de Groot, 2011; Ellemers, Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004).

### What happens after the glass cliff? Exploring career trajectories

Most research to date has examined the factors leading up to the appointment of women to glass cliff positions. But there is a small amount of research that examines what happens to women after they have secured such positions. In particular, Cook and Glass (2014a) found that CEOs who are members of occupational minorities (e.g., women) are more likely than base-rates would predict to be replaced than their white male counterparts. When short-term performance declines this also significantly increases their chances of being replaced by a majority group member. Cook and Glass argue that this is because occupational minority members are given less leeway to lead their firms out of crisis, while the ultimately return of majority group leader is understood as signaling that things have returned to normal — a phenomenon they term the “savior effect”.

These findings are supported by research from consulting company Strategy& (Davidson & Brest, 2014). Examining the world's 2500 largest public companies over a ten-year period, their exhaustive study of corporate leadership transitions found that female CEOs are more likely to be forced out of office than are men. Specifically, while 27% of male executives end up being fired, for female executives this figure rose to 38%. Such findings present concrete evidence that, rather than simply being a matter of perceived or potential risk, the precariousness of glass cliffs manifests itself an increased incidence of career trauma. Moreover, as we have noted, when this occurs it can clearly serve to confirm stereotypes about women's unsuitability for high office.

### Conclusion: Getting off the glass cliff

A decade of research into the glass cliff confirms that it is a robust and pervasive phenomenon and a significant feature of the organizational landscape for women who achieve high office. The impact of the idea beyond academia also points to the capacity for leadership scholarship to have practical impact in the world at large. Nevertheless, in concluding, it is helpful to clarify three key points of potential misunderstanding that have arisen as commentators and practitioners have attempted to bring the above ideas to bear on the everyday business of women in leadership.

The first point to emphasize, and that we have tried to underscore in the review above, is that glass cliffs are multiply determined and context-dependent. As a result, there is nothing inevitable about their occurrence and there is no sense in which they are an ineluctable product either of psychology, of biology, or for that matter business life. By the same token, just as a cold winter should not persuade us to forget about global warming (or imagine it to be fictional), so too the fact that there are spheres and contexts in which there is minimal evidence of the glass cliff should not surprise or alarm us. As we have seen, the primary task for researchers (as with those who study global warming) is therefore not to establish whether the phenomenon is real or unreal, but to understand when and why it occurs, and how the problems it creates can be overcome.

Related to this, a second point is that the glass cliff is not primarily about single cases. In the media in particular, there is a tendency for journalists to latch on to a single case of a senior women who comes under fire in her role (often losing her job), and then for debate to focus on whether or not she has been a victim of the glass cliff. Did Julia Pierson lose her position as head of the US Secret Service because she was a woman or because she was incompetent? Would a man have received the same treatment? Was Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, a victim of the glass cliff, or just another casualty of the rough and tumble of politics? Did Janet Yellen get her job as Head of the Federal Reserve because the financial system was in meltdown, or because she was the best person for the position? Is the fact that she is doing a good job (and has not been fired), evidence that the glass cliff is inconsequential? These types of question are routinely posed and are ones that we are routinely called upon to answer. However, interesting as they are, neither we nor anyone else is in a position to provide definitive answers. What we can do is point to evidence from large-scale archival, survey, and experimental studies that allows us to contextualize and make sense of particular examples. This is particularly important when the specifics of a single case (like a cold winter) are marshaled to conclude that there is nothing distinctive about the problems that women confront as leaders.

And yet, our third and final point is that perhaps, after all, there is nothing distinctive about the problems that women confront as leaders. Indeed, as work on the topic has progressed, we have been struck by the persistent framing of the glass cliff as “a woman's problem”. And yet, if one looks at the data which give rise to the effect (e.g., Judge's, 2003, original data on the relationship between women's presence on company boards and those companies' performance), it is apparent that it is driven as much, if not more, by the fact that men are given preferential access to cushy leadership positions (what Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012, refer to as “hot jobs”) as by the fact that women are appointed to precarious ones. Perhaps, then, it is the distinctiveness of the leadership positions that men receive that is the real problem. If so, then one important way to get women off the glass cliff may be to start focusing our attention on men's privileged access to the *glass cushion*.



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