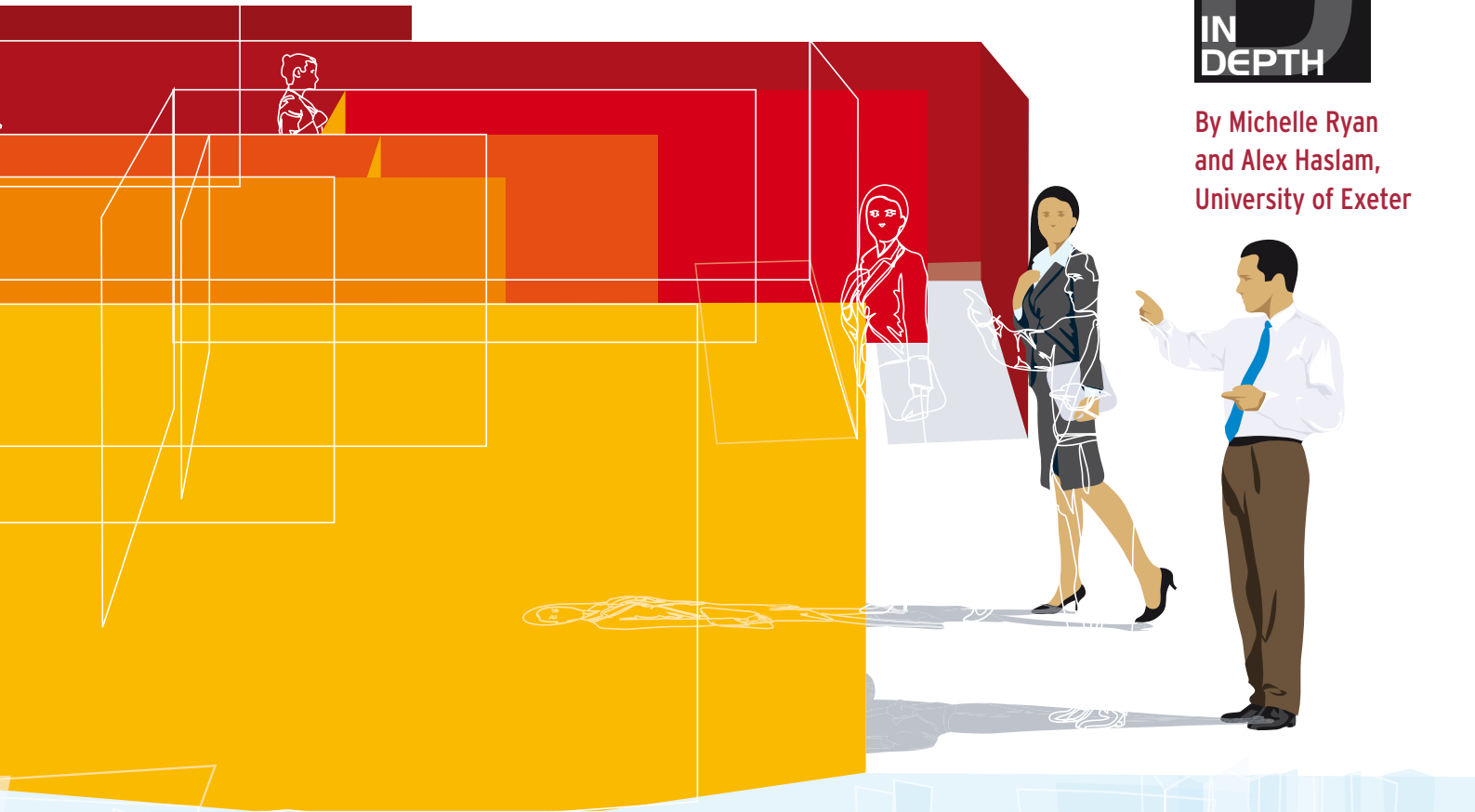


# THE GLASS CLIFF: THE STRESS OF WORKING ON THE EDGE

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## Women are more likely than men to be given leadership roles that are risky, precarious and stressful. Are they set up to fail?

**T**he glass ceiling” is a common metaphor used to describe the largely invisible barrier that women face as they attempt to reach the upper echelons of management. Although 20 years have passed since the *Wall Street Journal* coined the phrase, it is clear that the glass ceiling still exists, with women continuing to be under-represented in leadership roles. However, despite this, the number of women reaching management positions is

greater than ever before. So what happens to those women who do succeed in breaking through the glass ceiling?

To address this question, for the past three years we have been conducting research that examines the nature of the leadership positions that women attain, and the circumstances surrounding their appointment to leadership roles. Using a combination of archival and experimental studies, as well as in-depth interviews with women in senior positions, our research suggests that the experience of women in leadership

Illustration: Nick Reddyhoff

## The glass cliff: the stress of working on the edge

roles tends to be quite different from that of men. In particular, we found evidence of a “glass cliff”, whereby women are more likely to be given precarious or risky leadership roles than men.

### The precariousness of the glass cliff

In response to claims in the media that women board members were “wreaking havoc on corporate Britain” (Judge 2003), our initial research examined FTSE 100 companies in the UK. We investigated the share price performance of companies both before and after the appointment of male and female board members. In contrast to media conclusions, we found that the appointment of female board members did not lead to a decline in company performance. Indeed, if anything, such appointments actually appeared to lead to an increase in company share price.

What was more interesting was the pattern of performance in the months prior to board appointments being made. Here we found that men tended to be appointed to companies that were experiencing relatively stable performance, but women were more likely to be appointed to the boards of companies

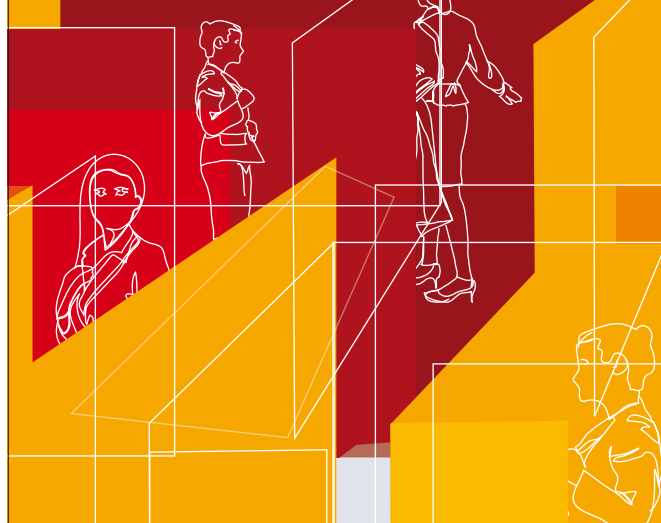
**“We suggest women leaders are more likely than men to find themselves in positions associated with a high risk of failure”**

that had been experiencing consistently poor performance.

This research points to the importance of examining the types of positions women occupy if we are to understand their experience in leadership roles. Indeed, based on our findings, we suggest that women leaders are more likely than men to find themselves on a “glass cliff”. As such, their positions are associated with a high risk of failure, and are correspondingly precarious.

### Women as crisis managers

As it has evolved, our research has moved beyond the boardroom to examine the existence of glass cliffs across a diverse range of settings and sectors. One of the key questions we have investigated is whether women’s over-representation in risky and precarious positions is a product of decision-



### IN BRIEF

- Women are more likely than men to be given leadership roles that are risky or precarious.
- While men are given safer and more secure jobs, women at all levels often feel that they have been “set up to fail”.
- These roles are leading to increased stress for women leaders, and to larger numbers of women departing senior management positions.
- Glass cliffs may also have repercussions for organisations, leading to poor communication and decision-making.

making processes during leader selection. We used scenario-based experimental studies to examine people’s preferences for male and female candidates under conditions of low and high risk.

Across a range of scenarios the results from such studies consistently show that when provided with details of two equally qualified candidates for a leadership position - one of them a man and the other a woman - respondents overwhelmingly favour the female candidates if the opening is described as difficult and involving a high risk of failure.

Such a pattern of results has been found in studies where participants selected (a) a financial director of a large multinational company, (b) a lead lawyer for a legal case that was doomed to fail, (c) a youth representative for a music festival experiencing declining popularity, and (d) a political candidate contesting an unwinnable election. Significantly, the pattern has also been found using participants who include undergraduates in relevant fields - for example, law, politics - but also senior business leaders.

Scenario studies like these allow us to investigate the phenomenon of the glass cliff under controlled conditions, in which we keep constant the factors that could be seen to play a role in the phenomenon as encountered in organisations at large. By this means we have been able to demonstrate, among other things, that glass cliffs are not a reflection of differences in the qualifications, past experience, or the age of men and women. Moreover, our research indicates that the patterns of preference that lead to the creation of glass cliff positions can occur at all levels of organisational life, from

relatively junior positions to the most senior. Intriguingly, our studies reveal that male and female respondents have a similar tendency to appoint women to positions of leadership in times of crisis.

These experimental findings are echoed in the observations of senior women speaking about their workplace experiences. One female executive told us: "When my company is faced with deteriorating customer situations I often have to assume more responsibility than was the case prior to the situation developing. It is my perception that my male colleagues are very happy to take the bows and credit when everything is going smoothly, but they are quick to deny responsibility when things take a turn for the worse. They are quick to offload that responsibility to me."

### Teetering on the edge

To further examine the nature of glass cliffs, we have documented the ongoing experiences of women in the workplace. From anonymous online questionnaires, four focus groups and 58 one-to-one interviews, it is clear that the notion of precariousness resonates with women. Indeed, in an international sample of senior managers, only five per cent of women doubted the existence of glass cliffs, compared with 50 per cent of men.

However, as our research has progressed, it has become apparent that feelings of precariousness are not restricted to leadership positions with an inherent risk of failure. Instead, it is clear that women feel that a number of organisational factors contribute to their leadership positions being more risky and precarious. One of the key factors women identify is that they are often not included in the informal networks that exist within their workplace.

As one woman told us: "I was placed on a project to manage that was the 'project from hell'. Was I set up for failure? I don't know. But I know it would have been different if I was male. I would have been part of the old schoolboy network they had going."

Our research suggests that women may be excluded from these informal networks for a number of reasons. One that is commonly reported is that networks often

develop around traditionally masculine activities, such as after-work trips to the pub or to the golf course. Furthermore, because women are more likely to take on a disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities, they are often not able to become - or to stay - involved in out-of-work activities that build into informal networks, be they traditionally masculine enterprises, or those that are more inclusive.

One major consequence of their exclusion from informal networks is that women often feel that they do not receive the same amount of social support as men. In the words of one female professional: "I may be on a glass cliff now. I often feel there is not much support in regard to my situation, perhaps because I am not part of the still-present old-boy network."

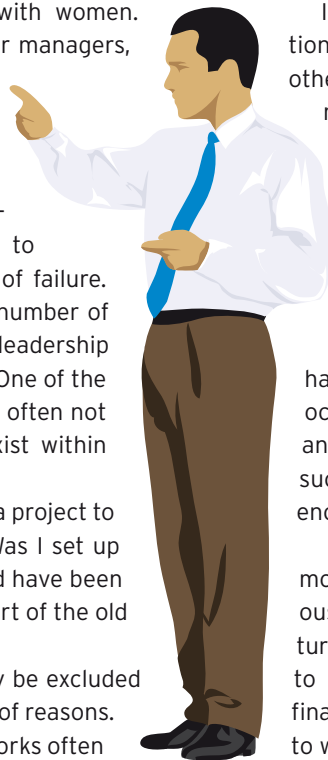
Along similar lines, women commonly remark that they are asked to take on difficult jobs without being given enough information to fulfil their roles. As one female professional remarked: "I was asked to take on a role without the full background history. The vital information that was missing meant that the sensible approach to the problems would cause a serious backlash of unrest. I feel I was set up to fail."

In many cases women felt that it was formal information about the role or the task that was withheld. On other occasions, though, they felt it was the more informal "tips" that were not forthcoming: the sort of information that a colleague may mention "around the water cooler". Trivial as such inside knowledge may seem, it is nonetheless a crucial part of succeeding in the workplace.

### The consequences of the glass cliff for women

As intimated above, precarious leadership positions have important consequences for the women who occupy them. The most obvious one is that they involve an increased risk of failure. However, even if women in such positions manage to succeed, they may still experience negative outcomes.

One senior manager told us: "I was personally promoted into a difficult management role, where a previous male manager had failed, with the hope that I would turn it around. When I did, the 'reward' was to be moved to another turnaround role - without any additional financial reward or kudos. Meanwhile, male peers appear to work less hard with fewer hours, in maintenance roles



**FIGURE 1: THE GENDER-STRESS-DISIDENTIFICATION MODEL**



- and with greater reward. I often wonder if I'm just a fool to accept such challenges. I doubt the men would."

Significantly, the key factors that we have identified as contributing to glass cliff positions - such as inadequate information and support from colleagues and superiors, inflated job demands and a lack of control over tasks - have recently been identified by the UK Health and Safety Executive as major causes of workplace stress. Unsurprisingly, glass cliff positions have been shown to be associated with high levels of stress for the women who hold them.

This is illustrated by the following quote: "I am a management consultant. For my first project as 'team manager' I was brought in halfway through a failing project to replace a more experienced male manager. It was perceived that I was more pragmatic and capable of delivering multiple complex tasks to a demanding client under deadline. I delivered successfully, but this was extremely stressful for me, as there was a great deal of pressure for me to succeed."

Such remarks are a common feature of our interviews with senior women managers. Having made it to the top, many feel battle-scarred by the experience and a great many report high levels of burnout. Indeed, large-scale survey data from around the world suggests that ten years ago women experienced less stress in the workplace than men, but now experience more (men's level of stress has remained constant over this time). Consistent with the broad thrust of our research, this pattern would appear to reflect the fact that as they advance up the corporate ladder women are exposed to greater stress than their male counterparts.

### **Consequences of the glass cliff for organisations**

It is apparent from the above discussion that glass cliff positions can be hazardous for the women who occupy them because they are associated with increased risk of failure and stress. Importantly, though, glass cliffs can also have adverse

consequences for organisations. A large body of research suggests that as individuals experience high levels of work-related stress they are likely to distance themselves from the organisation. As one of our participants observed: "As I started to realise how stressful all this was, I started to have serious doubts about whether I was in the right place. I mean, what's the point of it all?"

Reduced identification of this form has been shown to have a range of detrimental consequences. Among other things, it has been shown to contribute to poor communication between staff, faulty decision-making, reduced productivity and decreased organisational citizenship behaviour. Reduced organisational identification also has important implications for employee commitment, and is linked both to depleted motivation and increased turnover. In short, where the stresses of leadership lead women to question their attachment to the organisation they often vote with their feet. This is one reason, we suspect, why studies have indicated that women's tenure of chief executive positions is considerably shorter than men's.

As represented schematically in the figure above - what we call the gender-stress-disidentification model - the appointment of women to glass cliff positions damages the women who hold them and their organisations. Furthermore, the link between the barriers that women face in the workplace, such as the glass cliff, and their decisions to abandon conventional careers is an important one.

Many commentators have noted that women are leaving the workplace at high rates - either to focus on family life or to become entrepreneurs and establish their own businesses. Some have argued that this exodus is taking place because women are less ambitious or less committed than men. Commentators also contend that because women are choosing to leave organisations of their own accord, the underrepresentation of women in management has nothing to do with gender discrimination.

**“We would argue that subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as the glass cliff, are often a key reason why women decide to leave organisations or why their careers stagnate”**

We would argue that subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as the glass cliff, are often a key reason why women decide to leave organisations or why their careers stagnate. While such discrimination may not always be overt, our research suggests that it is often an outcome of the particular forms of stress that women confront as they pursue their career ambitions.

This is illustrated in the experiences of a senior corporate lawyer:

“I am frequently praised for my technical and management skills. However, I am frequently put into situations where I have to manage a transaction with not enough staff, whereas the men always get all the resources they need. So it is easier for them to shine. I am also frequently given more than one transaction to manage at a time whereas the men seem only ever to have one transaction at a time - again it is easier for them to shine.”

She continues: “This is because I am a good multi-tasker and a great people-manager - or this is what I have been told in my reviews. But having more than one transaction to do with few resources means that I get very stressed, which is then negatively commented on in my reviews. Anyhow, I have now just been given a position that involves fewer hours, less prestige and less money. At least I have job security.”

As our research has progressed, we have been increasingly convinced of the need to integrate the various facets of women's experiences into a coherent model that speaks to the organisational lives of both women and men, and to the ways that these can be improved. There is a need to provide sustainable leadership opportunities for all employees, so that organisations can harness the distinct competencies of all their employees, not just some.

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