



Opting out or Pushed off the Edge? The Glass Cliff and the Precariousness of Women's Leadership Positions

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Abstract

The glass cliff refers to the phenomenon whereby women are overrepresented in leadership roles associated with high risk and an increased chance of failure. Research into the glass cliff has focused on documenting the existence of the phenomenon and understanding the psychological processes that contribute to the appointment of women to precarious positions. This paper summarises this research and extends it by examining the implications that glass cliff positions have, both for the women who occupy them and for the organisations in which they exist. The gender–stress–disidentification model suggests that glass cliff positions are inherently stressful, and lead women to experience a reduced sense of organisational identification. This, in turn, has important implications for organisations in terms of reduced commitment and increased turnover. Taken together, the research presented here offers an alternative analysis of women's increasing disaffection with the workplace, which takes into account gender differences in workplace experience.

Despite many years of the feminist social movement, continued political lobbying, and legislative reform, women continue to be underrepresented in the most powerful positions of society. This is particularly true in the corporate world, where women are clearly a minority among those in power. For example, within the European Union, women make up, on average, just over 10% of the top executives in the top 50 publicly quoted companies (European Commission, 2005). Similarly, in the USA, women make up less than 16 percent of corporate officers and less than 15 percent of members of boards of directors within Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2007).

Traditionally, research and media attention has concentrated on discriminatory practices within organisations, and the barriers that women face as they climb the career ladder. As such, the metaphor of the glass ceiling has been drawn on to depict the experience of women in the workplace for over 20 years (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987;

The Corporate Woman, 1986). The notion of the 'ceiling' implies that women encounter an upper limit in how far they can climb the organisational ladder, while 'glass' refers to the relative subtlety and transparency of this barrier, as it is not necessarily apparent to the observer.

However, as a small number of women start to break through the glass ceiling, the research, and in particular, the media spotlight has moved away from discrimination, and instead focused on the large percentage of the women *choosing* to leave their high-powered posts (e.g. Belkin, 2003; Hall, 2005; Mero & Sellers, 2003; Wallis, 2004; see Williams, 2006, for an overview). For example, in a controversial article published in the *New York Times Magazine*, Belkin asked the headline question 'why don't women make it to the top?' and her answer was that 'they choose not to'. Describing a new 'opt-out revolution', Belkin argues that women don't want to do what it takes to get to the top and instead are choosing to change their priorities, reject the workplace and voluntarily leave full-time employment. Indeed, describing her own experiences, Belkin revealed that she 'was no longer willing to work as hard ... for a prize (she) didn't really want' (p. 47).

Similarly, Larry Summers, then the President of Harvard University in the USA, (in)famously suggested that women were underrepresented at the top of science and engineering because such leadership positions required a level of commitment that they were not prepared to make (Summers, 2005). In a final example, in 2005, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported the results of a survey of the retail industry in the UK that revealed that 40 percent of women on the boards report consciously holding themselves back from seeking the top job (Hall, 2005). Furthermore, the article suggests that 'women shy away from the top jobs because they are unwilling to sacrifice their family life, are less aggressive than their male counterparts, and less concerned about job status than men'.

Such an explanation for the dearth of women in the upper levels of management may be compelling; however, there are a number of reasons why we may question such accounts. In particular, explaining the underrepresentation of women at the top in terms of voluntary decisions not to pursue leadership may be a strategic response to discrimination (e.g. Crosby, 1984; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002) or an attempt by women to avoid the negative costs of challenging discrimination (e.g. Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Furthermore, using the notion of personal choice to explain a failure to achieve leadership positions may be empowering because it gives women a sense of agency and control (e.g. Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002) and suggests that there are other ways in which women can be successful than by simply fitting into a masculine notion of success (e.g. Belkin, 2003; Gerson, 1986). However, there is the danger that by emphasising personal choice such accounts may undermine the importance of the barriers that women face in the

workplace. Indeed, at the same time that Larry Summers claimed that women were voluntarily choosing to opt out of demanding jobs, he also questioned the role of discrimination in the glass ceiling, instead suggesting that biological or natural differences in ability may be responsible (for a discussion of such explanations, see Morton, Haslam, Postmes, & Ryan, 2006).

This paper will describe an alternative account of women's under-representation in leadership positions, which attempts to reconcile the fact that there is an increasing number of women leaving organisations with the notion that discriminatory organisational practices still occur. We review a programme of research that suggests that women's decisions to leave organisations have, in the first instance, little to do with an inability to cope with life at the top or having different priorities from men. On the contrary, we will argue that it is women's differential experiences in the workplace, such as their appointment to precarious and stressful glass cliff leadership positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007), which lead them to opt out of organisational life.

Women Leaving the Workplace

There is some evidence for the claim that women are opting out of the workplace, particularly from senior management positions. For example, Hewlett and Luce (2005) surveyed almost 2,500 professional women and found that nearly 40 percent had voluntarily taken time out from work, compared to only 24 percent of men (see also Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1996; but cf. Lyness & Judiesch, 2001). Moreover, 44 percent of the women who had taken time out from work did so for family reasons such as needing to look after children or an elderly family member (compared to only 12 percent of men). Explanations for women's decisions to leave the workplace also focus on their differences from men on key dimensions such as ambition and drive (Paton, 2006). For example, while Fels (2004) acknowledges the detrimental pressures of family and social norms, she claims it comes down to women's choices: '... when the choice must be made, women choose to downsize their ambitions or abandon them altogether' (pp. 8–9).

While women may be leaving particular organisations, there is evidence to suggest that women do not necessarily opt out of the workplace altogether (Boushey, 2005; McDowell, 2006; Townsend, 1996). For example, a recent Catalyst study examining why women left a large accounting firm demonstrated that 90 percent of the female professionals leaving the organisation (including those with young children), did not opt out of the workplace altogether, but instead continued their careers within other organisations. Of these women, over 70 percent remained in full-time employment (Townsend). Together with the evidence that an increasing number of women are becoming entrepreneurs – as

evidenced by a dramatic increase in women-owned firms (McDowell) – these data suggest that women may be motivated to leave their jobs for reasons other than a lack of ambition or a wish to stay at home with their children.

Supportive of such a notion, the research by Hewlett and Luce (2005) suggests that in addition to ‘pull’ factors – family and lifestyle factors that influence women to voluntarily leave organisations – there are also organisational ‘push’ factors – those aspects of the work environment that compel women to leave. Indeed, they report that 17 percent of the women they interviewed reported leaving work because their jobs were not satisfying or meaningful and because they lacked the opportunity to progress. Moreover, the research illustrates that in the business sector (as opposed to teaching or medicine), feelings of being undervalued and a lack of opportunity outweighed family reasons as causes for women opting out (see also Stone & Lovejoy, 2004; Stroh et al., 1996).

Thus, while it may be the case that some women choose family over work or have lower levels of ambition, it is clear such explanations are overshadowed by organisational push factors. Taken together, these studies suggest that in order to fully explain women’s retreat from the workplace it is important to shift our focus from the home and family, back to the workplace. Indeed, the importance of push factors may point to the fact that women’s experiences in the workplace are very different from that of their male colleagues, and it is this differential experience that may underpin the higher exit rates for women compared to men.

The Glass Cliff

In order to examine the differential experience of men and women in the workplace, we have recently conducted a programme of research examining women’s experience above the glass ceiling. Such a question is increasingly important, since, while gender inequality in the workplace continues, growing numbers of women are obtaining senior positions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2006). In this research, we have demonstrated that, once through the glass ceiling, women are more likely than men to confront a *glass cliff*, such that their leadership positions are more precarious than those of their male counterparts and are associated with greater risk of failure and criticism because they are more likely to involve management of organisational units that are in crisis. Evidence of the glass cliff has been obtained using multiple methods, including archival, experimental, and qualitative research (see Ryan & Haslam, 2007, for a review).

The initial research examined the top 100 companies in the UK, investigating the share-price performance of companies both before and after the appointment of male and female board members (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The results revealed that women were appointed to board

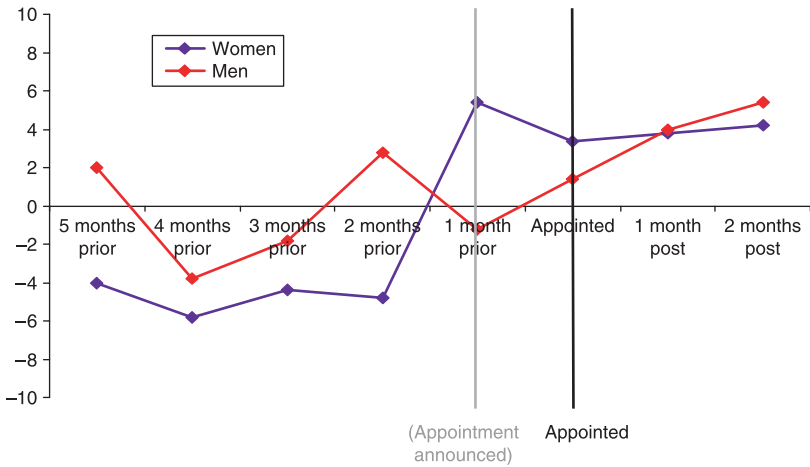


Figure 1 Company performance before and after the appointment of male and female board members.

positions under very different circumstances than men. In particular, as can be seen in Figure 1, in a time of a general financial downturn, companies that appointed men to their boards of directors showed relatively stable company performance before the appointment. In contrast, companies that appointed a woman to their boards of directors had experienced consistently poor performance in the months preceding the appointment.

Thus, it was apparent that female board members were taking on positions under very different circumstances than their male counterparts. Specifically, due to a continuing pattern of poor company performance, women's positions were associated with a higher risk of failure, and were therefore more precarious. Indeed, as suggested by research into the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), those who occupy glass cliff leadership positions may receive a disproportionate share of the blame when things go wrong, being held accountable for events set in train long before they took control (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

This programme of research then moved beyond the boardroom, finding evidence for glass cliffs across a diverse range of settings and sectors. One of the key questions that the work has explored is whether women's overrepresentation in risky and precarious positions is a result of decision-making processes during leader selection. This idea has been tested using experimental scenario-based studies that have examined people's preferences for male and female candidates under conditions of low and high risk (Haslam & Ryan, forthcoming; see also Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, forthcoming).

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 candidate when the position is in an organisational unit that is in crisis and, hence, associated with an increased risk of failure. Moreover, respondents see the female candidate as significantly more suitable for a risky situation than for one in which the organisation is running smoothly. Such a pattern of results has been demonstrated in studies where participants selected (i) a financial director for a large multinational company with declining share price performance (Haslam & Ryan, forthcoming, Studies 1 and 3), (ii) a lead lawyer for a legal case that was doomed to fail (Ashby et al., 2007), (iii) a youth representative for a music festival experiencing declining popularity (Haslam & Ryan, forthcoming, Study 2), and (iv) a political candidate contesting an unwinnable by-election (Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, forthcoming). Significantly too, the pattern has been observed not only among student samples, but also among senior business leaders (Haslam & Ryan, forthcoming, Study 3).

Importantly, these experimental studies demonstrate that the glass cliff cannot simply be explained in terms of a tendency for women to prefer, or actively choose, leadership positions that are more risky (an explanation favoured by some senior women themselves; see Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007; Woods, 2004). They also argue against the more drastic assertion that women leaders are actually the cause of organisational crisis (e.g. as argued by Judge, 2003).

Having identified the organisational reality of glass cliffs, it is also important to understand the causes underlying the phenomenon. Research suggests that glass cliffs are multiply determined, arising from a confluence of social psychological and social structural factors. One important process implicated in the phenomenon is implicit theories of gender and leadership, which see women as better suited to crisis management than men (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, forthcoming). Such work demonstrates that while men are seen to possess the abilities required to take on leadership roles in a time of success (see also Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995; Schein, 1973), women are seen as best equipped to deal with the socioemotional challenges that potential crises present.

Other research suggests that, in line with enquiry into other forms of gender inequity in the workplace, the glass cliff is determined by a range of processes (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). These can be understood in terms of at least two continua: the first ranging from processes that are deliberate (e.g. reflecting overt sexism or discrimination in the workplace) to those that are inadvertent (e.g. arising from gender stereotypes), the second ranging from processes that are malign (e.g. a desire to find scapegoats) to those that are benign (e.g. a desire to appoint women to available positions).

Beyond Poorly Performing Companies

As our research has progressed, it has become apparent that the notion of precariousness is not limited to leadership positions in poorly performing companies. In order to provide in-depth analysis of the experiences of women in glass cliff positions, we have conducted around 50 face-to-face interviews and a series of focus groups and online studies (e.g. Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan, & Haslam, 2006, forthcoming). This qualitative research examined each women's career paths, with particular emphasis on the critical events that helped or hindered progress. Precarious situations, such as those carrying a high possibility of failure, were explored in order to gain a better understanding of the forms that risk takes in relation to career advancement in a variety of professional environments. The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The qualitative data obtained from these studies reveal that women are aware of a number of organisational factors that contribute to their leadership positions being more risky and precarious than those of men.

One of the key factors women identify is that they are often *not included in the informal networks* that exist within their workplace. Networks, such as the 'old schoolboys networks', can both protect people from entering dangerous positions and provide help and support to cope with the difficulties associated with such roles (Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien, & Jacobs, 2004). As one of our interviewees 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 that they had going.

This support need not simply be emotional in nature; networks also provide an important source of practical information (House, 1981). Indeed, women commonly remark that they are asked to take on difficult jobs and are *not given sufficient information* to complete the job satisfactorily. 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. Had I known (or asked) who had already refused it and why I would not have taken it on. I feel I was set up to fail.

A final factor that can lead to a feeling of precariousness is a *lack of acknowledgement*, both of the difficulties involved in a particular role and of accomplishments that are achieved despite these difficulties. In the words of one woman:

I was promoted into a difficult management role (where the 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 and fewer hours – and with greater reward. I often wonder if I'm just a fool to accept such challenges. I doubt that the men would.

Taken together, this lack of support, information and acknowledgement contribute to feelings of precariousness and insecurity and make it more difficult for women to deal effectively with the challenges involved in leadership positions.

The Consequences of the Glass Cliff

While the phenomenon of the glass cliff is well established, more recent work has investigated the implications of the glass cliff, both for the women who occupy them and the organisations in which they are employed. One important characteristic of glass cliff positions is that they are inherently stressful. Indeed, as outlined above, such positions often involve (i) a lack of support from colleagues and superiors, (ii) inadequate information, and/or (iii) a lack of acknowledgement and respect. Importantly, each of these factors has recently been identified by the UK Health and Safety Executive as a significant workplace stressor (Health and Safety Executive, 2005; see also Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). In view of the fact that glass cliff positions are also associated with an increased risk of organisational failure, it is therefore unsurprising that they are found to be highly stressful by those who hold them. This inherent stressfulness is made clear in the following quote from a female management consultant:

For my first ever project as 'team manager' I was brought in halfway through a failing project to replace a more experienced male manager. I delivered successfully, but this was extremely stressful for me, as there was a great deal of pressure for me to succeed.

Having made it to the top, many women feel battle scarred by the experience and, in line with the above observations, many report high levels of burnout and withdrawal (e.g. Burke, 2004; Jick & Mitz, 1985; Nelson & Quick, 1985). Existing literature offers a number of explanations for women's burnout, including women's overrepresentation in vulnerable professions (e.g. Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001), unbalanced work-life roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1985) and increased emotional labour (Pugliesi, 1999). However, consistent with the broad thrust of research into the glass cliff, this pattern may also reflect the fact that as they advance up the corporate ladder, women are exposed to greater stress than their male counterparts (e.g. Nelson, Hitt, & Quick, 1989).

Stress is increasingly associated with a range of negative workplace outcomes (Kompier, Cooper, & Geurts, 2000). Among other things, it has adverse effects on job performance (e.g. Motowidlow, Packard, & Manning, 1986) commitment (Cooper & Williams, 1994) and absenteeism (Spector, Dwyer, & Jex, 1988). In this way, glass cliff positions may have

negative consequences beyond a simple increase in the risk of failure. One possibility is that stressful glass cliff positions may lead to disillusionment, not just with one's job, but with the organisation more generally (e.g., Steele, 1997; Steele & Aaronson, 1995). If this is the case, then there is an increased likelihood that individuals facing glass cliffs will disidentify with their organisations and distance themselves from them (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2004; Reynolds & Platow, 2003). Indeed, such a response was expressed by one of our interviewees, a health and safety executive, who remarked:

There's a model where it's a balance between the employee and the organisation, about give and take. And if it's gone too far one way, that you're doing all the giving and they're doing all the taking you become really disenchanted, and you lose faith, and you lose any kind of belief in the organisation.

Research into the role of identification within the workplace (or a lack of it) suggests that such a reduction in organisational identity is in turn likely to have significant negative implications (Haslam, 2004), such as (i) reduced workplace effort and motivation (e.g. van Knippenberg, 2000), (ii) reduced cooperation (e.g. Tyler & Blader, 2001), (iii) poor communication (e.g. Postmes, Tanis, & DeWit, 2001), (iv) reduced leadership effectiveness (e.g. Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Turner, 1991), as well as (v) reduced commitment to decisions (e.g. Haslam, Ryan, Postmes, Jetten, & Webley, 2006) and to the organisation itself (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Dick et al., 2004). This flagging commitment is revealed as the above respondent went on to remark:

I'm fed up now with fighting, and I just want something to work. And so I think it's good that I'm going overseas because if I wasn't, I would leave – it's very tiring to take that discrimination or Glass Cliffiness on a daily basis for so long.

The constellation of factors here suggests that, ultimately, glass cliff positions can be a source of demotivation and disenchantment that may curb women's leadership ambitions. Such disillusionment is articulated by a senior lawyer who comments:

I just go to work at the moment really; I don't have any big career plans. I suppose when you feel you've been let down, like I felt I was, it takes something away from you with regards to ambition in your career.

Thus appointment of women to glass cliff positions can set in train a chain of events that are potentially damaging both for the women that hold them and for the organisations that employ them. These distinctive aspects of women's organisational experiences can be integrated into a coherent model – the gender–stress–disidentification model, represented schematically in Figure 2 (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, & Wilson-Kovacs, forthcoming). To summarise then, as women begin to break through the glass ceiling they are more likely than men to find themselves in precarious leadership positions. The nature of these positions, including the increased risk of

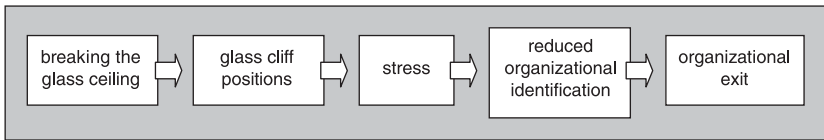


Figure 2 The Gender-Stress-Disidentification model.

failure, together with the lack of support, resources and information, renders these positions particularly stressful. In turn, the day-to-day experience of this stress can cause women to disidentify with organisations and to seek to distance themselves from them, a motivation most clearly realised in their decision to leave the organisation altogether. Significantly too, this sequence of events can be seen, at least in part, to underlie the phenomenon addressed at the start of this chapter – whereby women come to display decreased levels of ambition and commitment. Importantly, research suggests that this pattern of results is not evident in men (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, & Wilson-Kovacs, forthcoming). Because men's experiences in the workplace differ from women's in terms of the support they receive, the networks they belong to and the expectations others have of them, challenging positions that may become glass cliffs for women can instead be seen as opportunities for men that actually raise organisational identification (see also Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994).

Conclusions

Glass cliff positions, and the stressfulness associated with such positions, have clear and tangible implications for organisations. Indeed, organisations that place women in risky and stressful positions have at least three reasons for wanting to address the issue. First, in many countries legislation mandates the protection of the health and safety of employees (e.g. Health and Safety Executive, 2006) with organisations liable to both civil and criminal charges if workplace stress is not addressed. Second, the economic cost of stress is well documented. Estimates suggest that stress-related absenteeism and sick-leave can account for up to 10 percent of company profit (Martin, 1997; Hoel, Sparks, & Cooper, 2001). Finally, given the relationship between stress and increased turnover intentions, addressing the stress associated with women's positions is essential if organisations are to retain the talent of female employees.

This programme of research suggests that women's experiences in the workplace are very different from their male counterparts. Such findings provide an alternative to the claims of Larry Summers (and many others) that women intrinsically lack the commitment to make it to the top. Indeed, they suggest that it is not necessarily an inherent lack of ambition or different priorities that leads women to opt out of organisations, instead, lowered commitment may be a direct outcome of workplace

practices that lead women to occupy positions that are, by their nature, stressful. Thus, the blame for women's underrepresentation at the top should not be placed squarely on the shoulders of women themselves.

The programme of research presented here suggests that equal opportunity is not simply about the number of women in leadership roles, but the *nature* of those positions as well. Thus, it is important to note any attempt to achieve gender parity within organisations must not only address the quantity of women in senior positions but also the quality of those positions. Were organisations to show their commitment to giving women not just leadership opportunities, but opportunities in which they can succeed and prosper, it is highly likely that women in turn would prove much more willing to make, and retain, their commitment to these organisations.

Short Biography

Michelle Ryan obtained her PhD from the Australian National University and is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, UK, holding a 5-year Academic Fellowship from the Research Council of the UK. She is a member of the Centre for Identity, Personality and Self in Society, and specialises in research into gender and gender differences. Together with Alex Haslam, she has uncovered the phenomenon of the glass cliff, whereby women (and members of other minority groups) are more likely to be placed in leadership positions that are risky or precarious. Research into the glass cliff is funded by large grants from the European Social Fund and the Economic and Social Research Council and was recently short listed for the Times Higher Education Supplement Research Project of the Year. This work has been represented in academic journals, industry publications, and within the wider media, including BBC, CNN, ITV and all major British newspapers.

Endnote

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