

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Exeter		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 4 Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
Title of case study: The glass cliff: Shaping the narrative regarding the roles, failures, and inequality that female leaders face		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 to present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Michelle Ryan Alex Haslam	Prof of Social & Org Psychology Prof of Social & Org Psychology	2003 - present 2000 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Research by Ryan and Haslam has uncovered a previously unknown empirical phenomenon, the 'glass cliff'; whereby women are more likely to be appointed to risky and precarious leadership positions in times of crisis. The idea of the glass cliff continues to have an impact on public, political, and global attitudes and discourse. It provides an enhanced cultural understanding that women leaders may fail due to subtle bias rather than to them being poor leaders; by 2016, the 'glass cliff' had become one of the 2016 Oxford English Dictionary's Words of the Year. The glass cliff has been used as a basis of the analysis for female leaders, including the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential elections, Theresa May's Prime Ministership during Brexit, and Christine Lagarde's role at the IMF to promote an understanding of why women have a higher chance of being promoted during a crisis; and in 2020 to frame understanding about ethnicity and leadership. Awareness of the concept is now sparking wider debates globally and is represented in web guides and blogs (e.g. Fundera, LinkedIn, Home Business) on how women can avoid "falling off" the glass cliff and being reflected in popular fictional TV programmes.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Previous research has described the barriers women face in trying to climb the corporate ladder, with evidence suggesting that they typically confront a 'glass ceiling' while men are more likely to benefit from a 'glass escalator'. Ryan and Haslam's research at Exeter investigated the context in which women (and other minority group members) are more likely than men to be appointed to leadership positions that are associated with an increased risk of criticism and failure; dubbing this empirical phenomenon the 'glass cliff'.</p> <p>The Times published an article (Judge, Nov 2003, 'Women on Board: Help or Hindrance') reporting a tendency for UK Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies with women on their boards to perform less well than those that have all-male boards. They concluded women were "wreaking havoc on UK companies". In response to this claim, Ryan and Haslam conducted a rigorous, in-depth analysis of the 2003 share price performance of FTSE 100 companies both immediately before and after the appointment of a male (n=17) or female (n=19) board member [3.1]. It was revealed that while there was a relationship between a company appointing a female board member and its share price performance decline, there was an alternative explanation to that claimed by the Times. Rather than women in top jobs causing poor company performance, they were more likely to be appointed to such jobs after a consistent pattern of poor company performance.</p> <p>Ryan and Haslam tested the hypothesis that women are more likely than men to be appointed to risky and precarious leadership positions (because these positions are more likely to involve leadership of organisational units that are in crisis) in a series of experimental studies [3.2-3.4]. Consistent with predictions, results indicated the likelihood of a female candidate being selected</p>		

ahead of an equally qualified male candidate increased when the organisation's performance was declining rather than improving. When the company was performing poorly, 65-86.4% of participants preferred the female candidate, but only 39-56.9% preferred the female when the company was performing strongly [3.2, 3.3], thus further understanding gender roles in higher positions. These studies provided evidence that glass cliff appointments are associated with beliefs that when a company's performance declines, female candidates are viewed as a more able leader than male candidates, because women are not expected to actively handle the crisis and turn around the business, i.e. they were not selected for their leadership credentials, while males are more likely to be placed in leadership positions associated with no such risk [3.2, 3.3].

More recently, the research has been expanded to investigate situations outside corporate organisations to political settings [3.4] and focused on explanations including the glass cliff being used as a signal of change [3.3]. Further research has been done in the US, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, and Germany continuing the discussion on how women tend to occupy leadership roles that were more uncertain and perilous than their male counterparts – the glass cliff.

Ryan and Haslam's research was shortlisted for the 2005 Times Higher's Research Project of the Year. Research into the glass cliff and related research has been funded by a series of peer-reviewed public and private sector grants awarded to Ryan, Haslam, and colleagues at Exeter. These included a grant from the European Social Fund (2005-2006 £625,498): 'Beyond the glass ceiling: Social psychological analysis of the glass cliff and the precariousness of women's leadership positions'; an academic RCUK fellowship awarded to Ryan, of which 50% was allocated to research on the glass cliff (2005-2010; £125,000 Research Councils UK); an ESRC large grant (2007-2010; £1,063,021) 'The individual in the group: Social identity and the dynamics of change' with 10% allocated to the glass cliff; and the European Research Council Consolidator Grant (2017-2022; €1,998,722) 'Context, identity & choice: Understanding the constraints on women's career decisions, which builds directly on the glass cliff research.

A review of 15 years of research was published in 2016 [3.5] and a meta-analysis analysing 74 studies and 91 independent samples investigating the glass cliff [3.6] is currently in press.

3. References to the research

(Authors in bold are from the University of Exeter)

3.1 Ryan, M. K. & Haslam, S. A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence that women are overrepresented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*, 16, 81-90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2005.00433.x>

3.2 Haslam, S. A., & Ryan, M. K. (2008). The road to the glass cliff: Differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations. *Leadership Quarterly*, 19, 530-546. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.07.011>

3.3. Kulich, C., Lorenzi-Cioldi, F., Iacoviello, V., Faniko, K., & Ryan, M. K. (2015). Signaling change during a crisis: Refining conditions for the glass cliff. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 61, 96-103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.07.002>

3.4 Kulich, C., Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2014). The political glass cliff: Understanding how seat selection contributes to the under-performance of ethnic minority candidates. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67, 84-95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1065912913495740>

3.5 Ryan, M. K. Haslam, S. A., Morgenroth, T., Rink, F., & Stoker, J. I. & Peters, K. (2016). Getting on top of the glass cliff: Reviewing a decade of evidence, explanations, and impact. *Leadership Quarterly*, 3, 446-455. (Special Issue) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.10.008>

3.6 Morgenroth, T., Kirby, T.A., Ryan, M.K., & Sudkaemper, A. (2020). The who, when, and why of the glass cliff phenomenon: A meta-analysis of appointments to precarious leadership positions. *Psychological Bulletin*. DOI: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/bul0000234>

4. Details of the impact

The discovery of the previously unknown phenomenon of the glass cliff by Ryan and Haslam has continued to have a demonstrable impact in changing the vocabulary, understanding, and public discourse around the precarious positions that women and other minority group members are often put into when given senior appointments. Key to this impact, the glass cliff has noticeably shifted public discussion of female leaders from a critique of their poor performance - which is a form of stereotyping and bias that perpetuates gender inequality - to a more nuanced and complex discussion recognising that woman may be appointed to certain precarious positions which make it more difficult to succeed. Given the current cultural and media climate with regard to women speaking out against discrimination, sexual misconduct, and unequal pay, the public is becoming more aware of inequalities and discrimination that women face. The glass cliff is an invaluable lens through which public discourse can generate a new way of thinking to discuss these injustices. Such a shift in dialogue, both in Britain and internationally, acknowledges ongoing subtle bias faced by senior women in the workplace.

Impact on Public Discourse

Since the glass cliff impact case study was submitted to REF2014, the term 'glass cliff' has continued to have an impact on public discourse. While initial media coverage was restricted to reports about the research project, in more recent years this has no longer been the case. The majority of references to the glass cliff now do so without reference to the research itself. Instead, the term has achieved the status of a common phrase used within public discourse to explain women's leadership. Evidence of the glass cliff impacting on public discourse is best demonstrated by examining the media use of the term. A Google news search for 'glass cliff' from January 2014 to March 2020 revealed over 1,245 news articles that refer directly to the glass cliff; the large majority of them in regard to females in leadership roles. The glass cliff has become part of common parlance and an accepted term to use in journalism when describing discrimination against female leaders. A broader phrase search on Google revealed over 101,160 hits (up from 21,000 at 2014REF) and over 642 videos. Some of these hits included the Freakonomics podcast (February 2018; over 2,000,000 downloads/streams) where Ryan was interviewed discussing the glass cliff. The host stated: *"it would seem the glass cliff is a significant problem with significant ramifications. So: what's to be done about it? How can more good female executives attain the leadership roles they deserve — and not just at companies that are in crisis mode?"* [5.1].

In 2016 the Oxford English Dictionary counted "glass cliff" as one of their words of the year [5.2]. The word of the year is chosen from a shortlist of words that the Oxford English Dictionary language research program identifies as new and emerging words that "...reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year and (that) have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance." The glass cliff Wikipedia page had 394,603 page views since it was created in 2015 and 1,211 #glasscliff trending on Twitter since 1 August 2013, further indicating the term 'glass cliff' is not only being used in research and the media but now a commonplace, global word.

Improved media and political recognition of gender discrimination

Political debate has been informed by Ryan and Haslam's research with news articles citing the glass cliff as plausible explanations for Theresa May's rise and fall amidst the Brexit crisis, the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections [5.3], and women's political leadership throughout COVID. Articles that utilise the term 'the glass cliff' are more likely to recognise the gender bias associated with May's appointment and are more likely to recognise the difficulty of her position. Those that don't mention the glass cliff are more likely to focus on her performance (without a context in which to understand it) and thus perpetuate gender stereotypes that women are poor at leadership.

Ryan and Haslam's research has also been represented worldwide [5.3], including the Huffington Post, the Washington Post, and the New York Times (average 8 million views). The Fast Company cite real-world, global examples of the glass cliff such as the UK and French general election results from 2001, 2005, and 2010 *"...each country's conservative party tended to support female and minority candidates when conditions weren't favorable for them to succeed...The implication is that conservatives are deliberately choosing to put women and minorities in these*

no-win situations in order to have them fail and support the status quo of having white men in power.” As well as citing examples of women experiencing the glass cliff in the corporate world, such as Carly Fiorina (Hewlett-Packard), Pat Russo (Alcatel-Lucent), Zoe Cruz (Morgan Stanley), Diane Greene (VMware), Dawn Hudson (PepsiCola North America), and Marissa Mayer (Yahoo) [5.4]. During the current Coronavirus pandemic, President Trump has surrounded himself with female advisors, which has gained attention from the media as a potential glass cliff situation.

Impact on Global Discourse on female leadership and empowerment

National and international media have embraced the term glass cliff, incorporating it into analyses of women’s leadership positions. Global news websites [5.5] (The Times, The Guardian) have discussed the glass cliff. The Independent focused on how the glass cliff is not a local, but global phenomena: *“Subsequent research in an array of environments has demonstrated that this is not an isolated issue, nor is it unique to certain industries or geographical locations. It reveals that women in top leadership positions seem to be routinely handed inherently unsolvable problems....This creates a damaging, self-fulfilling prophecy that women are unsuitable for leadership positions. Not only does it knock the confidence of the woman in question, it also makes organisations wary of recruiting women to these positions.”* [5.5].

Forbes not only explains and expands on the glass cliff but encourage women to stand up against it and encourages companies to reevaluate their hiring practices: *“Instead of focusing on the fact that female leaders are being set up to fail, we should be looking for ways to fight back against it. Let’s encourage all companies to look into their unconscious bias and push for more women to take on C suite roles in those that are continuously successful”* [5.6]. The glass cliff sparked discussion on the US television programme, The Daily Show (June 2019). The host, Trevor Noah interviewed IMF president Christine Lagarde, and they both used the term “the glass cliff” to understand Lagarde’s appointment (average viewing audience of 1.43 million people per episode) catalyzing further discussion (e.g. on CNN) of the scarcity of female leadership. A month later Lagarde continued the theme in an interview with Quartz to highlight why women should be encouraged to take those opportunities as a means to empower their position. [5.7] The glass cliff concept was also discussed and used in the fictional TV show “Younger” (June 2019) as a theme for its entire season, to describe female characters being set up for failure in times of crisis whilst also proposing in the fictional setting the ways in which women might succeed in such positions (average viewership of over 1 million people) [5.8].

As a consequence, guides to surviving the glass cliff have emerged. For example, Fundera a US company specializing in loans for small businesses created a *“What is the glass cliff: 7 ways female business leaders can avoid falling off”* infographic; on the World Economic Forum web platform for the Middle East and North Africa, the CEO of Siemens Oman wrote a similarly which was then published on LinkedIn; Home Business highlighted their *“Don’t Trip Over the Glass Cliff”* for female entrepreneurs [5.9].

The glass cliff discourse has recently impacted conversations about corporate racism and ethnic minorities in leadership with coverage, for example, in Business Insider and Vox [5.10] magazines, and recent tweets from, for example, Michelle Lee editor-in-chief of Allure magazine (5.3M monthly readership) stating *“I’ve thought a lot about the glass cliff... keep in mind when you see POC (people of colour) in leadership positions, that they may face challenges their predecessors have not had”* [5.10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1. Dubner, S.J. (2018, February 14). *After the Glass Ceiling, a Glass cliff* (Ep. 319). Freakonomics podcast. <https://bit.ly/30Uxbee>.
- 5.2. Oxford English Dictionary. (2016). Word of the year 2016: Shortlist. <https://bit.ly/3vFXwuC>.
- 5.3. a.) Stern, S. (2019, May 25). *Like many women before her, Theresa May was set up to fail*. The Guardian. <https://bit.ly/3c3vt0G>; b.) Goldberg, M. (2019, January 21). *A woman to*

- vanquish Trump*. The New York Times. <https://bit.ly/2QkU8Fw>; c.) Moores, N. (2018, July 17) *Theresa May is standing on a Glass cliff*. Huffpost. <https://bit.ly/3cPfzG5>.
- 5.4. Dishman, L. (2018, July 07). *What is the Glass cliff, and why do so many female CEOs fall off it?* Fast Company. <https://bit.ly/3r6tnRD>.
- 5.5. a.) Hill, A. (2016, July 18). *'Glass cliffs' and the female leaders who are set up to fail*. Financial Times. <https://bit.ly/2P3IH4m>; b.) Whawell, S. (2018, April 30). *Women in boardrooms falling off 'Glass cliff', research shows*. The Independent <https://bit.ly/2P2ORIf>; c.) Ryan, M., Haslam, A. (2018, November 12). *The Glass cliff: women left to take charge at times of crisis*. The Times. <https://bit.ly/3s1rV4A>.
- 5.6. Barratt, B. (2018, November 20). *We need to be careful when talking about the Glass cliff*. Forbes. (4,349 views). <https://bit.ly/2PbS3Le>.
- 5.7. a.) Link to Christine Lagarde's interview with Trevor Noah <https://www.facebook.com/7976226799/videos/2502368059775602> 1" 01 – 1"45; b.) CNN discussion following the Trevor Noah interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f-1rqi4xy0> (12.07. 2019); c.) Christine Lagarde's Quartz interview: <https://bit.ly/2QcJbpg> (04.07.19).
- 5.8. Two-minute clip of an interview with the cast of *Younger* discussing the influence of the Glasscliff: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT_i3I3ztw with the actors noting the effect of understanding this concept in relation to women generally and, specifically, understanding UK politics.
- 5.9. a.) Fundera Blog <https://www.fundera.com/blog/what-is-the-glass-cliff> ; b.) World Economic Forum article (04.04.19) <https://bit.ly/30WqXue> republished on LinkedIn (19.04.19) <https://bit.ly/3vIc7Wn>; c.) Article on Home Business (28.06.19) <https://bit.ly/3c1qJz9>.
- 5.10. Dust , S. (2020) <https://bit.ly/38WicoE>; Stewart E (2020) <https://bit.ly/3s3ViDI> and screenshots of relevant tweets.