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THE INVISIBLE PERILS OF FEMALE SUCCESS

Women appointed to precarious leadership positions can suffer from being placed on a 'glass cliff' – UQ Professor Alex Haslam helped identify the phenomenon, and has spent over a decade researching its causes and ways to combat it.

A UQ professor is behind one of the words of the year for 2016.

"Glass cliff", shortlisted for the Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year, was coined by UQ School of Psychology's Professor Alex Haslam, together with University of Exeter researcher Professor Michelle Ryan.

Professors Haslam and Ryan initially coined the phrase in a 2005 paper to describe a phenomenon women face when they break through the glass ceiling into senior management positions, but often only when the organisation is struggling.

The two researchers were working together at the University of Exeter in 2003 when they read an article on the front page of the business section of *The Times* that drew a link between the appointment of women to corporate boards and the subsequent poor performance of those corporations.

The opening paragraph of the article, which was later amended online, stated that "[the] triumphant march of women into the country's boardrooms has...wreaked havoc on companies' performance and share prices."

Professor Haslam was immediately doubtful of these claims.

"This conclusion was entirely unwarranted, since the evidence on which it was based was correlational," he says.

Together with Professor Ryan he set out to explore the true circumstances around the promotion of women to senior positions.

Drawing on the same data set as the article – FTSE 100 companies in 2003 – the two researchers set about performing a rigorous statistical analysis, taking into account not just companies' performance after the

appointment of female board members, but also performance beforehand, and comparing it to the performance of companies who had appointed male board members at similar times.

In 2005, they published their results in the paper entitled "The glass cliff: Evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions".

Not only did they find that the appointment of women to the board of directors usually resulted in either a period of stock market stability, or a marked increase in performance, they also found that women were more likely to be placed in positions of leadership when companies were in a period of financial downturn and already performing poorly.

"In this way, such women can be seen to be placed on top of a 'glass cliff', in the sense that their leadership appointments are made in problematic organisational circumstances and are therefore more precarious," say Professor Haslam and Professor Ryan.

Examples of the glass cliff

In the years that followed, Professor Haslam and Professor Ryan, as well as many other researchers, created different studies to investigate the phenomenon further.

"The evidence that women tend to be appointed to sub-optimal leadership positions in business is now pretty incontrovertible," says Professor Haslam.

In one study, they presented university students with a case study of a company that was appointing a new financial director. Three candidates were presented for the position: a man and a woman who were both equally well-suited, and an additional man who was poorly suited, to

reflect the fact that female applicants for similar positions are usually significantly outnumbered. The participants were then randomly assigned information that showed that the company's performance was either improving or declining. Finally, they were asked to evaluate the applicants, and rank them in order of their suitability for the role.

The results of the study showed that while 57 per cent of participants preferred the female candidate when the company was performing well, this increased to 87 per cent when the company was performing poorly.

A second study, published in the same paper, used similar methods, but presented high school students with three applicants for the position of youth consultant to a music festival that had been either improving or declining over the past decade. In this study, only 38 per cent of participants preferred the female candidate when the festival was improving, compared to 75 per cent when the festival was declining.

A very similar pattern was also obtained in a third study that used the same experimental paradigm but where the participants were 83 British business leaders.

Professor Haslam, together with Professor Ryan and Dr Julie Ashby from the University of Exeter, also explored whether the phenomenon existed in fields outside of business. A study published in 2007, used an experimental paradigm in which participants judged the suitability of different candidates to lead on a legal case. When the case was low risk, the male and female candidates were considered equally suitable for the position, but when the case was high risk, the female candidate was preferred.

Professor Haslam and his colleagues also found that the glass cliff phenomenon is present in politics. They examined the 2005 UK general election, and found that on average, women contested seats that were held by the opposition by a margin of 5.1 per cent, while men contested seats that were held by the opposition by a margin of 2.6 per cent.

The researchers also looked at the difference between Labour and Conservative candidates, as only the Labour party had put in place affirmative action policies to ensure that women were selected to contest winnable seats. This was reflected in the results of the study, with Conservative female candidates running in seats that were held by the opposition by 26.2 per cent, compared to 12.4 per cent for men.

“It is clear that unless parties have policies to ensure against this, women are much more likely than men to be selected for seats that are unwinnable,” says Professor Haslam.

Why is there a glass cliff?

Research in recent years has also explored attitudes towards the glass cliff, and its underlying causes. Together with Professor Tom Postmes, now at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, Professor Haslam and Professor Ryan conducted a survey of 164 people who chose to complete an online questionnaire after reading an online BBC news article about the glass cliff.

Participants answered questions about whether they believed men or women were more likely to be appointed to precarious positions, how unfair and dangerous glass cliff positions were for women, and how likely it was that women would succeed in these positions.

They were also given the opportunity to answer the open-ended question, “What do you think leads women to be appointed to ‘Glass Cliff’ positions?”

The results clearly split down gender lines. Female respondents overwhelmingly thought women were more likely to be appointed to precarious positions, while male respondents thought men were. In fact, 50 per cent of male respondents denied that the glass cliff phenomenon existed, as opposed to just five per cent of female respondents.

Roughly a quarter of female respondents suggested that they believed inherent ingroup bias and sexism were the cause of the phenomenon, and that women were more likely to accept precarious leadership positions because they had limited career opportunities relative to their male counterparts.

Male respondents mostly offered benign explanations; apart from outright denial of the phenomenon, many suggested that it was an outcome of strategic decisions – such that when a company is performing poorly, it can seem like good idea to try something different and appoint a woman into a leadership role.

Another popular suggestion was that gender stereotypes could play a role in the appointment of women to precarious positions. Both men and women suggested that women might be more suitable for these roles because they are perceived to have attributes such a desire to help, a calm head in a crisis, and the ability to smooth things over.

Professors Haslam and Ryan used the findings of this study to emphasise how subtle a barrier the glass cliff forms for women, particularly when most organisations are led by men who are statistically least likely to recognise the glass cliff and the dangers associated with it.

Where to from here?

The glass cliff phenomenon is becoming increasingly recognised, as shown by its inclusion in the shortlist for the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016. Professor Haslam argues that recognition is the first step to addressing the glass cliff phenomenon and resolving the issues it causes.

“The first thing to do is recognise its existence,” he says. “This is a struggle for many organisations, because they have often invested pretty heavily in the process of defending themselves against accusations of bias, for example, by having various diversity policies in place.”

He says that the second step is for organisations to audit themselves, see what leadership opportunities are offered to women, and what their leadership paths are.

“In our experience this tends to uncover a range of inequalities – some subtle, others not. Having done this, you can set about trying to correct inequalities, preferably in consultation with both women and men, so that people understand what you are trying to do and why.”

Professor Haslam says that while these studies lay the foundation for positive change to overcome the glass cliff phenomenon in future, more research and consultation with organisations is required to make real progress for women to progress to less precarious leadership positions.

To this end, Professor Ryan is currently leading a study exploring the relationship

between the glass cliff and work-life balance, while Dr Kim Peters, Senior Lecturer in UQ’s School of Psychology, is leading a study looking at the effect of role-modelling in women’s leadership experience.

These three experts are now working together on a book on the glass cliff, to be published by Princeton University Press.

“I think there is quite a bit of evidence that the research has already had a lot of impact, but we want to find out more about how barriers to progress can be overcome collectively, in ways that make sense, and are appealing, to both men and women,” says Professor Haslam.

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(Image credit: iStock/Jorgenmac)

The adventure so far:

November 2003: Article published in *The Times* arguing that appointing female board members leads to declining company performance

2005: Professor Alex Haslam and Professor Michelle Ryan publish their first article coining the term “glass cliff”

2010: An article published in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* shows that in the 2005 UK general election women were more likely to be selected to a hard-to-win seat

November 2016: “Glass cliff” is shortlisted for the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016

January 2017: Professor Haslam, Professor Ryan and Dr Kim Peters sign a contract for a book on the glass cliff

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