

Women are shattering the glass ceiling only to fall off the glass cliff

By [Susanna Whawell](#)

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The glass ceiling is an idea familiar to many. It refers to the invisible barrier that seems to exist in many fields and which prevents women from achieving senior positions.



Image source: www.pixabay.com

Less well-known, but arguably a more pernicious problem, is the “glass cliff”. Originally recognised by academics Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam [back in 2005](#), this is the phenomenon of women making it to the boardroom but finding themselves disproportionately represented in untenable leadership positions.

Ryan and Haslam presented evidence that women were indeed starting to secure seats at boardroom tables. But the problem was that their positions were inherently unstable. These women would then find themselves in an unsustainable leadership position from which they would be ousted with evidence of apparent failure. The title of their paper sums it up: women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions.

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.

These are problems that they strive very hard to address – but no matter the effort, these problems cannot be solved. The women in charge are then still held personally accountable for failure, ultimately leading to their resignation or dismissal. 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.

A chequered picture

The glass cliff theory and its supporting evidence appears, at face value, to be at odds with evidence from other sources which confirms that more women than ever before [are making it to the boardroom](#).

But the detail of gender representation in large organisations presents a more chequered picture. Plus, the snapshots and headlines of more women in the boardroom tend to lack the granular analysis of boardroom turnover – that women are more likely to be over-represented on boards of companies [that are more precarious](#).

There is also the more challenging question of why any organisation would actively set out to sabotage someone's career, which is what the glass cliff situation appears to do. This is where the data gets really interesting.

A wider look at glass cliff scenarios [reveals](#) that in most situations the women in question have experience of the organisation when they are recruited into the top position. They are not external hires, they are internal. This means that, in practice, these women are far more likely to have a fundamental understanding of the politics of the organisation, its culture and power brokers.



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The evidence seems to suggest that these women find themselves with the choice of accepting a glass cliff position or resigning altogether. Having worked for many years to secure a leadership or executive role, it is perhaps less surprising to understand why these women feel a sense of obligation to take on what appears to be an impossible challenge.

Support structures

The size of the step up to a senior executive role should not be understated. Support, in the form of coaching and

mentoring for senior executives, is repeatedly shown to be vital if they are to become successful and [begin to make a real impact](#). What appears to be a common characteristic across glass cliff situations is that the women in these roles lack this ongoing support.

What remains unclear is whether this is because the organisation is unwilling to provide it. Or, worse, is blithely unaware that for a woman stepping up to an executive position with no clear role model or social support network, then she is likely to need even more help and likely of a different nature to her male colleagues.

The benign neglect shown by organisations towards female senior executives represents a worrying trend. It is all very well promoting women into the boardroom, but failing to support them when they are there is equally damaging. Arguably it undoes all of the good work, resources and effort to transition women into the boardroom in the first place.



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Empirical evidence also demonstrates that women in particular suffer from [impostor syndrome](#). This is the idea that successful people feel that they have become successful through luck, not their own hard work or ability and will be “found out” and fired or demoted.

It is understandable that this is likely to be particularly acute when a woman is the only female around the boardroom table. Impostor syndrome isn't confined to women, but it is [markedly more present](#), and it would seem that one of the possible explanations for a glass cliff scenario presenting itself is that organisations simply fail to consider that women in this position are likely to need a different kind of support in their new role.

Helping to create gender parity in boardrooms is widely shown to be beneficial on [multiple metrics](#). But if organisations aren't keeping good people in the boardroom because of a failure to appreciate individual differences, then this last hurdle arguably undoes all of the good work that quotas, all-female shortlists, and gender pay gap reporting strives to achieve.

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