

V I E W *point*

TAKING THE FALL

*A new theory suggests more women are
being promoted in periods of crisis, often
after the men in charge have failed in their posts.*

*But are they being set up for failure
and blame? By KIRSTIE CLEMENTS*

The corporate landscape is undergoing a slow but definite shift as some of the most powerful and successful men in business, politics and media fall from grace, leaving room for women to step into the top jobs. But too often, these women are left to do damage control, and it's setting them up for failure as well. This may be something we've recognised anecdotally, but now there's a name for it: The Glass Cliff. It's a theory that was first posited by British professors Michelle K. Ryan and Alexander Haslam, which suggests that women who have been climbing their way to the top are often appointed head honcho when the company — or country — is in dire straits. In other words, they make their way to the top, only to fall — or be pushed — right off.

Think back to Julia Gillard, who became the first female Australian prime minister in the midst of a Labor Party bloodbath that eventually took her out, too. Or New South Wales senator Kristina Keneally, who became the state's first female premier in 2009, inheriting a government rife in scandal and allegations of corruption, and then suffered a brutal electoral defeat — the biggest in the state's history — in 2011. More recently, Channel Nine decided to replace Today Show host Karl Stefanovic with Deborah Knight, who joins Georgie Gardner at the helm. These two highly qualified women are now responsible for salvaging the long-struggling show's ratings — a nigh-impossible task that, if it fails (their first broadcast brought in the show's lowest audience in a decade), will most likely be deemed the women's fault. And when women fail in their attempts to save an organisation, it can lead to a widespread lack of confidence in an entire gender's ability to work at the top.

"It's common to see this situation, where women are taking on a big risk and set up to fail," says Jane Caro, social commentator and author of the new book *Accidental Feminists*. "With that comes an added burden, and the question is often asked: 'Can women cut it?' They have to outperform men. Women have no leeway to be ordinary, especially if they aspire to leadership."

For many women, getting into the workforce at all can be a challenge. Despite that, for more than three decades, Australian universities have seen more female than male graduates (55 per cent versus 45 per cent, respectively), they make up less than 40 per cent of all of management positions.

Sue Morphet, non-executive director and president of Chief Executive Women, points out that the over-representation of men who are working full-time in their thirties — typically people's professional mastery and child-rearing years — is an example of the gender imbalance at play. "Flexible working programs exist for both men and women in most organisations, yet 95 per cent of primary parental leave is taken by women," she explains. "You can see there are significant barriers to women's progression."

A woman's hesitance to apply for a management role can also dramatically hinder progress. Current Australian statistics published in Blenheim Partners' State of the Market report show as of December 31, 2018, there were just 17 female CEOs in the ASX 300 (six per cent of the CEO population) and 16 female chairs (five per cent of the chair population). "Many women feel they need proven outcomes and wins in order to ask for a promotion," says business and management consultant Robyn Holt, "whereas an underqualified man will just give it a crack and apply." (As Caro quips: "Oh, for the confidence of a mediocre man.")

Holt has held many top leadership roles, including CEO of Condé Nast Australia and Russia, and CEO of Saint Laurent

Australia, and has toed the edge of the glass cliff herself. "I was hired for roles after the male boss had failed," she explains. "While I was financially focused, I was also interested in transformation. The way the men had been operating was largely transactional, whereas women are generally more transformative."

Another prominent female CEO, who has chosen to remain anonymous, agrees with Holt. "Often the board will put in the guy they think will play to the market, but not necessarily investing in people," she says. "So when a female takes over, who may work more holistically or emotionally, she can be viewed with some suspicion."

"We should expect that by the time anyone — male or female — reaches this level, it is their capability and performance that should be discussed, fairly praised and fairly criticised," Morphet says. "From my experience, when women get the chance to lead, they are brilliant — why wouldn't they be?"

The question remains, if a woman is offered a highly problematic role, is she better to pass on it entirely or try and, perhaps, fail? If we take the example of Gillard, her particular poisoned chalice was rimmed with fierce and highly misogynistic criticism by the media and the public. "Women are treated more harshly by the media than men," Caro says. "We like a female to be the second in command, but not if they seek the top job. Older women are depicted as corrupt and evil, and younger women are trivialised. It's a sexist trope."

Sadly, while the media can be vicious, so too can the audience. Witness the treatment of AMP chair Catherine Brenner, one of the directors who resigned last year after the banking royal commission uncovered company scandals (including the poor treatment of financial-advice customers and deception of the corporate regulator). She was the only one who had photographers camped outside the family home, her appearance commented on, and questions raised about all the time she hadn't spent with

her children while she progressed in her career. "When you see companies in crisis, it's the woman, especially if she is attractive, who will be singled out and crucified," says another female CEO. "The faceless men, who are just as culpable, won't rate a mention."

Despite the daunting idea of being dispatched to the glass cliff, popular opinion holds that women should still grab the opportunity with both hands. "Sometimes you have to step away from yourself and have a go, even if you fail. It's important for the next generation of women coming through to see female leadership."

Caro's advice? "Give up the anticipation and the worry about what other people might think and do what is in front of you," she says. "Our entire gender has been held down and shackled. You are allowed to fail. Women are always expected to be perfect. For example, you would hear, 'Oh, Hillary Clinton wasn't a perfect candidate.' Well, no one in leadership is."

Caro suggests women be cognisant of instances where they are potentially being set up to fail, and address this in the first stage of job negotiations. "Say, 'Here are my terms. You and I both know this may be an impossible job, but it's a growth opportunity for me. So compensate me with a kick-ass payout.'"

Morphet reiterates the need for awareness on all fronts. "Moving towards gender balance across all levels of leadership requires a bold, multi-pronged approach. Some of it will fall to us all to improve societal attitudes," she says. "Companies also need to take a look at succession planning so that talented women can reach the top. If we don't do this now, we will lose another generation of women being given the opportunity to reach their full potential." ■

Accidental Feminists by Jane Caro (Melbourne University Publishing), \$33.

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