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# 'Think crisis, think female': Why Theresa May is a classic example of the glass cliff



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**Theresa May has spent her entire tenure as Britain's Prime Minister trying to make Brexit a reality. But did you know that she was originally against the concept?**

For a moment this week, it seemed like British Prime Minister Theresa May might be ousted by her own party.

Then, shortly after unhappy Conservative lawmakers triggered a no-confidence vote due to May's handling of Brexit, the majority rallied 200 – 117 to secure her job for at least one more year.

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So May carries on with the U.K.'s controversial and very high-profile divorce from the European Union. A divorce, it should be noted, that May did not personally vote for but stepped in to manage after David Cameron recused himself and only five contenders stepped forward.

May's tumultuous week does not surprise Erica Carleton, an assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan who teaches business leadership.

“When things are not seen as done well, women are very much crucified.”

It's a well-documented pattern that informs the sayings: “Think manager, think male,” and “Think crisis, think female.” In other words, women are often given chances to lead in times of crisis, but that is when their chances of failing are much greater.

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In 2005, U.K. researchers dubbed it “the glass cliff,” a nod to “the glass ceiling,” which refers to the unseen barriers that keep talented, well-educated women from ascending to leadership roles.

May, researchers say, is a quintessential example.

Alison Cook, a professor of management at Utah State University is co-author of a study that looked closely at every female CEO ever appointed to a Fortune 500 company through to 2014: 52.

What Cook and her research partner, sociologist Christy Glass, found is that 42 per cent of the women were appointed when a company was in crisis, whereas just 22 per cent of the men ascended to CEO roles during crises.

“Often, the women had no part in creating the crisis, but they step in,” Cook says.

Now, think of Brexit.

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“It was all Cameron’s work putting that forward and May’s having to pick up the pieces,” she says. “Other people at the time were not wanting any part of leadership... but she was willing to do it.”

Five people stepped forward to replace Cameron, a field of candidates that was whittled down to just two: May and another woman, then-junior minister Andrea Leadsom. But Leadsom pulled out, leaving just May.

May has not exactly been set up for success.

“Women are still, time and time again, given these opportunities when these organizations are struggling,” Cook says. “They’re starting at a deficit, they’re facing more scrutiny.”

In a series of experiments summarized in the Harvard Business Review in 2011, researchers Susanne Bruckmüller and Nyla Branscombe attempted to figure out why.

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They asked 119 college students to read articles about picking a successor for a retiring male CEO. In both cases, they had to choose between an equally qualified man and woman. But in one case, the company was struggling financially while in the other the company was on the upswing.

In the case where the company was doing well, 62 per cent picked a man. In the case where the company was struggling, 69 per cent picked a woman. And when the researchers changed the retiring fictional CEO into a woman instead of a man? There was no gender difference between picking a successor for a struggling company or a successful company.

In others words, Bruckmüller and Branscombe wrote, “the glass cliff disappeared.”

The takeaway, they wrote, “is a status quo bias. As long as a company headed by men performs well, there’s no perceived need to change its pattern of male leadership.”

Taking on such a leadership role can be risky for women, found “You’re Fired!” a study published last month in the Journal of Management.

That study, which compared the dismissals of 641 U.S. CEOs between 2000 and 2014 found that women were more likely to be let go than their male counterparts. And while “higher levels of firm performance” could

protect male CEOs, the researchers found it didn't afford women the same type of protection.

So why do women take on such high-pressure, high-stakes jobs?

May isn't alone.

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When Mary Barra became CEO of GM in 2014, she was thought of as "a bit of a lightweight." That same year, when American Apparel ousted CEO Dov Charney amid misconduct allegations, its board turned to a woman — Paula Schneider — to turn the company around.

Marissa Mayer was named CEO of Yahoo! in 2012 after a string of failed leaders, including Scott Thompson, who faked his resume. In the Canadian political sphere, there was Kim Campbell — Canada's first and only woman prime minister who held the job for just a few months. When poor polling in 1993 prompted Progressive Conservative leader Brian Mulroney to resign, Campbell stepped in. She lost her re-election in a Liberal landslide.

Research indicates that women often take leadership chances because they think it'll be their only opportunity, Cook says, whereas men tend to be more assured that they'll get more chances down the line.

"We've spoken to several leaders and they said it was a huge risk and either I was going to be rewarded greatly or I was going to derail my career. One shot."

The problem, Carleton says, is that until we address the systemic issues that limit women's leadership chances, when one woman fails or succeeds, it's positioned as an indicator of how all women will fare.

"When a woman fails, it shows, 'Yup, women are not good leaders,'" she says. "It perpetuates stereotypes and it's why [some] women don't want to be leaders."

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The origin of the term "glass cliff" seems to bolster Carleton's point. The 2005 research was sparked after a U.K. journalist compared underperforming companies with the percentage of women on their boards and concluded, "corporate Britain would be better off without women."

We lose a lot with that mentality, Cook cautions.

Most women who successfully climb the corporate ladder are "truly amazing," she says, because they've had to be exceptional in order to contend with work environments not exactly receptive to their success.

"They have a skill set that is pretty much unmatched," she says. "If they're given that sort of one-and-done chance, we're losing a lot of potential."

So how do we avoid losing that potential?

**WATCH: Theresa May suffers embarrassing defeats at start of Brexit debate**

"The only thing that is going to change the problems that women face in leadership is having more women in leadership positions and I don't mean one or two more, I mean many, many more," Carleton says.

"I don't think women should have to change... I think we can do more to make it easier for women."

Having women like May in those positions, even if there's controversy and even if the situation seems precarious, helps, says Janice McDonald.

McDonald is founder of The Beacon Agency in Ottawa and is involved extensively in women's leadership. While ideally, you want to design systems that focus more on skills and less on gender, she says for women who want to work in leadership roles, "seeing is believing."

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"There has to be that intention, that deep desire for change," McDonald says, while acknowledging it isn't easy to take your leadership shot in difficult moments, like during Brexit.

"I'm thankful for those brave women who say, 'I'm still going to give it my best shot and see where it goes.'"

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