

# Postcard



Welcome to our International Womens Day **Postcard From the ROCK**. We make these monthly Postcards topical DEI subjects and short enough to read in just a few minutes.

## **BEAR IN MIND...**

### **It's not just the glass ceiling...it's the glass cliff we worry about!**

Every March, we celebrate women's achievements as they "break the glass ceiling" into previously inaccessible high-level positions. Male-dominated organizations and sectors delight in announcing their new "firsts": first woman President/Chair/Director; first racialized woman General/Commander/CEO. And celebrate they should: these women have worked hard to get there!

But there's another story not often told: many of these women break through the glass ceiling...only to find themselves on the *glass cliff*.

The term glass cliff was coined by Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam (University of Exeter) in 2003, in response to a British *Times* article suggesting that average annual share price of FTSE 100 companies that had the most women on their boards tended to underperform compared to others, and that women were wreaking havoc in these companies.

Skeptical of these conclusions, Ryan and Haslam probed more deeply. Their findings were in some ways unsurprising: these companies had been underperforming even before women were brought on to their boards. Susanne Bruckmüller (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) and Nyla R. Branscombe (University of Kansas) shed light in two experiments published in *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 2011).

Bruckmüller and Branscombe found that "when a company is doing well, people prefer leaders with stereotypically male strengths, but when a company is in crisis, they think stereotypically female skills are needed to turn things around." These findings do not explain all "firsts." But they do speak to gendering of failure, same as racialized people sometimes feel about racializing of underperformance. The glass cliff raises an interesting question: if women are deemed capable of rescuing doomed vessels—what if they were promoted before things started falling apart?

Let's bear this in mind!

Reference: Oluo, *Mediocre - The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*, p.149-184