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**THE GLOBAL
INSTITUTE
FOR WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP**



Australian
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University



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To Advance Equality for Women, Use the Evidence:

Three Missteps We Make



World view

To advance equality for women, use the evidence



By Michelle Ryan

These are three mistakes universities make when they attempt to improve gender equity.

I'm an academic who studies women in leadership roles and also heads an institute devoted to this topic at the Australian National University in Canberra. So I spend a lot of time thinking about what it takes to achieve gender equity in workplaces. By now, the vast majority of universities, research institutions and funding bodies have some sort of initiative aimed at gender parity. In 2005, the Athena Swan accreditation programme to promote gender equity at universities was launched in the United Kingdom and later adopted in North America, Australia and elsewhere. In 2011, China's ministry of science and technology issued a policy to help advance women in science and technology careers. In 2020, ambitious programmes began in the European Research Area and India.

Yet the most recent European Commission data show that women make up about half of doctoral graduates and only about one-quarter of senior academics and people in decision-making positions. In North America and Western Europe, only 33% of those employed in research and development are women; this drops to 24% in east Asia and the Pacific area, and to 18.5% in south and west Asia.

Why this inertia? In my view, progress could be faster if institutions that trumpet efforts to promote equity applied established research in their initiatives.

Here are three common missteps.

First, an overemphasis on quantity. Yes, metrics such as the proportion of female professors and grant winners are important. But simple tallies erase disparities in quality. Any tracking must capture the experiences and influence that awards and positions bestow. Do those given to women bring the same visibility, recognition and resources as those given to men? The proportion of women achieving authorships and professorships matters less if these are concentrated in sub-optimal, low-influence or temporary roles.

Consider the 'glass-cliff' phenomenon. Fifteen years ago, my colleagues and I reported that women are more likely than men to be given leadership roles that are risky, precarious and even doomed to failure (M. K. Ryan and S. A. Haslam *Acad. Mgmt. Rev.* 32, 549–572:2007). Archival, experimental and qualitative research provided evidence for this 'poisoned chalice', which holds from firms in the FTSE 100, the main UK share index, to chief librarians and heads of state. As institutions try to navigate a pandemic, as well as rising costs and increasing societal divisions, such considerations matter more than ever. The crucial question is, are women getting the same quality of promotions as men?

A second mistake is emphasizing training for individuals, instead of overhauling systems and cultures. Again and

“It is not women who need fixing, but entrenched systems of inequality.”

again, I see women offered extra coaching to encourage them to take career risks, overcome 'impostor syndrome' and boost their skills in leadership and grant writing. But the evidence is clear: it is not women who need fixing, but entrenched systems of inequality.

Our research demonstrates that women's confidence and ambition are not inherently lower than men's, but are eroded by experiences in unequal workplace cultures – not having role models, and being treated differently from male counterparts. Similarly, women are not inherently risk-averse; they operate within systems that reward men for risk-taking, but punish women for the same behaviour.

Individually targeted interventions, at best, provide a short-term fix for a few already privileged women, and, at worst, reinforce the assumptions of success and leadership that underlie systemic gender inequality. Indeed, training programmes for women can have perverse effects by becoming yet another unrewarding demand on their time.

And the third mistake undermines all sorts of efforts: over-optimism. Yes, improvements are real and should be celebrated. Still, surveys of representation in boardrooms, films and various professions show that men and women consistently overestimate women's representation.

In one of our studies, we found that veterinary surgeons who felt that sexism is no longer a problem in their profession were the most likely to pay a female member of staff less than a male member and to give her fewer career opportunities. In another study, men who overestimated the proportion of women in the medical profession were the least likely to support gender-equality initiatives.

What's needed are interventions that genuinely address gender inequality in all its complexity and nuance.

There are good examples of concrete things that can be done: (1) systematic changes that improve the visibility and voice of women, such as prohibiting 'manels' (all-male panels), or requiring conference organizers to report proportions of women who are keynote speakers and panel members; (2) making senior leaders accountable for progress towards gender equality, as the Australian Champions for Change programme does, in which members track factors such as pay, promotions and employment experiences; and (3) making research funding contingent on having a transparent and appropriately resourced gender-equality plan in place, as happens in the European Union's research and innovation strategy. Downgrading such requirements, as Britain announced in 2020 that it would do, exemplifies the sorts of backsliding on women's progress that is happening all too often now times are tough.

Good intentions are not enough to bring about change; nor are simple tallies, training programmes or unwarranted rosy views. Change requires sustained investment, appropriate incentives and evidence-backed interventions.

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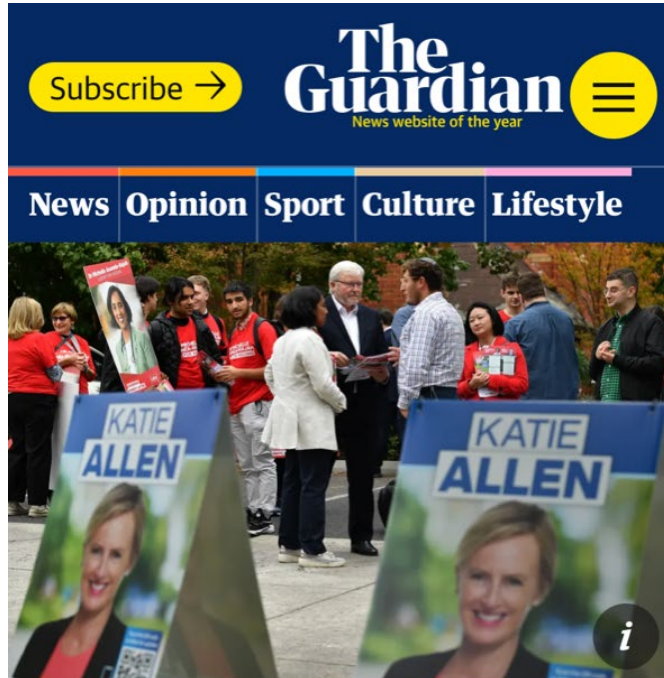
Three missteps:

1. An overemphasis on quantity
2. Trying to 'fix' women
3. Over-optimism

An Overemphasis on Quantity



The Glass Cliff



Women in politics

'Glass cliff': only two in 10 female Coalition and Labor candidates in winnable seats, analysis finds

Christine Holgate. The woman who fell off a glass cliff.



BILLI FITZSIMONS

News Writer

APRIL 14, 2021



The Glass Cliff

- Archival, experimental, case study, and qualitative work demonstrates that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions in times of crisis
- These positions are risky, precarious, and stressful
- Impact women's experience and their tenure
- Risk reinforcing stereotypes that women are not suitable for leadership

Implications

- A focus on the *number* of women in leadership positions, ignores the *nature* of these positions.
- Need to ask when and why



Trying to 'Fix Women

Trying to 'Fix Women



LEAN IN

WOMEN, WORK, AND
THE WILL TO LEAD

SHERYL SANDBERG

Fortune does favor the bold and you'll never know what you're capable of if you don't try.

- SHERYL SANDBERG

LE

I HOPE THAT YOU—**YES, YOU**—HAVE THE AMBITION TO LEAN IN TO YOUR CAREER AND RUN THE WORLD.

- from the book LEAN IN

leanin.org

—
a seat on a

SHIP

you don't ask what seat.
YOU JUST GET ON.

—
- from the book LEAN IN

leanin.org

Women's Choices

BUT

- Places the onus on women
- Ignores continuing structural barriers
- Promotes individual mobility
- Leaves the status quo untouched



LEAN IN

WOMEN, WORK, AND
THE WILL TO LEAD

SHERYL SANDBERG

Context Constrains Women's Choices

Our ambition and willingness to sacrifice **do not** occur within a social vacuum



Women's career choices are **shaped and constrained** by organisational and social contexts and how women see themselves within these contexts

Implications

- Women's confidence and ambition are related to the distinctive treatment they receive at work - particularly the negative treatment they receive.
- Organisations need to provide a culture and context that fuel women's ambition and motivation rather than stymie them.



Over-optimism



PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

In some professions, women have become well represented, yet gender bias persists—Perpetuated by those who think it is not happening

C. T. Begeny^{1*}, M. K. Ryan^{1,2}, C. A. Moss-Racusin³, G. Ravetz^{4,5}

In efforts to promote equality and combat gender bias, traditionally male-occupied professions are investing resources into hiring more women. Looking forward, if women do become well represented in a profession, does this mean equality has been achieved? Are issues of bias resolved? Two studies including a randomized double-blind experiment demonstrate that biases persist even when women become well represented (evinced in veterinary medicine). Evidence included managers evaluating an employee randomly assigned a male (versus female) name as more competent and advising a \$3475.00 higher salary, equating to an 8% pay gap. Importantly, those who thought bias was not happening in their field were the key drivers of it—a “high risk” group (including men and women) that, as shown, can be readily identified/assessed. Thus, as other professions make gains in women’s representation, it is vital to recognize that discrimination can persist—perpetuated by those who think it is not happening.

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When discrimination is no longer a problem?

Survey Respondents: Managerial Vets

$N = 266$, all with managerial experience

54% female

46% have 10+ years of managerial experience

88% currently working as manager and/or employer



[Redacted] Hospital
ANNUAL REVIEW FORM



Name	Elizabeth [Redacted]	Review Period	01/08/16
Location/Dept	[Redacted]	Review Date	05/09/17
Reviewing Manager	C.K. [Redacted]		



Performance Overview

Overall, how has the last year gone? What went well? What could have gone better?

Line Manager Comments

Research Engagement: Elizabeth is clearly engaged with, and keeping up on, the most up-to-date research in a number of relevant areas. Going forward, I think this level of knowledge will make her more adept and better equipped to work on complex cases (e.g., establishing diagnoses, treatment plans).

Communicating with Clients: It is also quite notable that Elizabeth quickly develops a good rapport with clients. She is kind, understanding and sensitive to their needs and concerns.

Working Independently: At the same time, Elizabeth is not fully confident when working independently. For example, when interacting with clients she can be hesitant and a bit unsure of herself when discussing treatment plans and prognoses, risks and benefits of potential interventions, etc.

Financial Aspects of the Practice: It also seems that Elizabeth is yet to achieve a certain amount of insight regarding the financial and business elements of running a practice (e.g., an awareness of all the expenditures involved in running this type of business), which is an important area of knowledge to have.

Collaborating with Colleagues: Elizabeth also has a tendency to work alone, rather than in a collaborative manner. Similarly, she does not often seek out advice or guidance from her more senior colleagues.

Colleague Comments

[Redacted]



AGREED BY (sign all pages):

Employee Signature	Manager Signature
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What would advise for Mark [REDACTED] ?

Pay

If Mark [REDACTED] was employed in your practice, what salary do you think would be fitting for her?

Evaluation

Generally speaking, how competent does Mark [REDACTED] seem to be?

Treatment

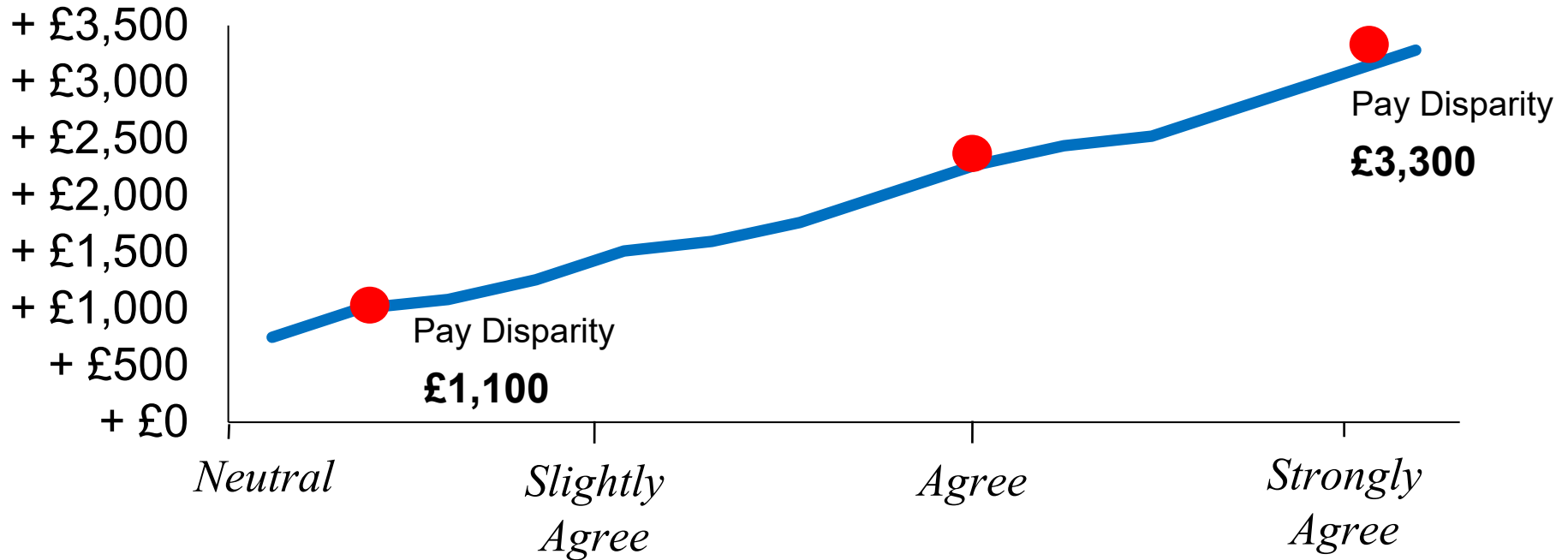
If Mark [REDACTED] was employed in your practice, along with several other vets, would you:

- let her start taking on more supervisory / managerial responsibilities?
- give her the opportunity to be more involved in managing the business/financial side of the practice?
- advise other vets to look to her as a valuable source of knowledge & guidance?

“Elizabeth” vs. “Mark”: Advised Salary

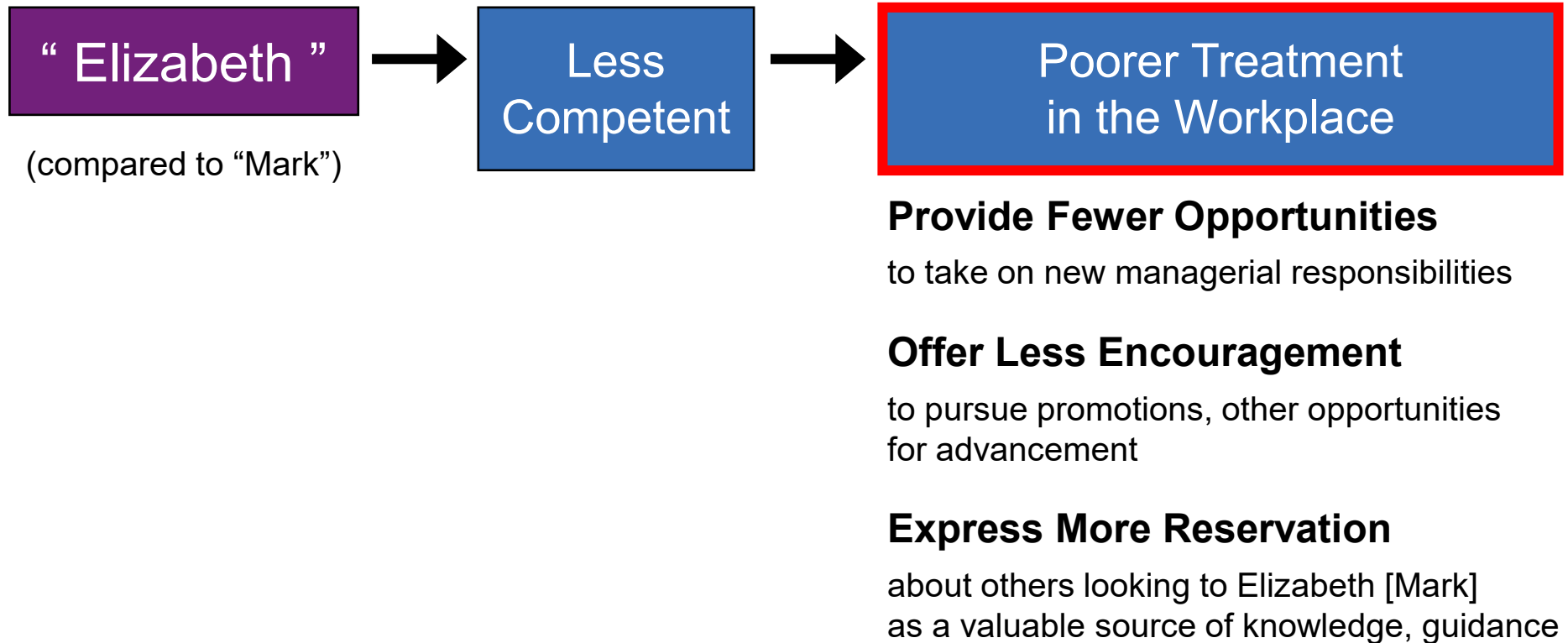
size of
Pay Disparity
(favouring Mark)

Among those who believe
discrimination against women is no longer a problem



“Elizabeth” vs. “Mark”: Evaluations of Competence & Treatment

Among those who believe discrimination against women is no longer a problem



Thus...



Over-optimism

- A failure to recognise ongoing discrimination
- Associated with increased discrimination
- Also associated with less support for gender equality initiatives (Begeny, Grossman, & Ryan, 2022)

Conclusions

- Numbers are not enough – quantity of women vs quality of positions
- Fixing women does not tackle the root of the problem nor does it lead to systemic change
- Celebrate wins, but over-optimism is associated with discrimination and stymies change



- yes
- no
- maybe

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