



Open Research Online

Citation

Bell, Emma; Sinclair, Amanda and Vachhani, Sheena (2024). A Leadership of Refusal: Remaking the Narrative of the Falling Leader. *British Journal of Management* (early access).

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/96233/>

License

(CC-BY 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>


Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

A Leadership of Refusal: Remaking the Narrative of the Falling Leader

Emma Bell ¹, Amanda Sinclair² and Sheena J. Vachhani³

¹Open University Business School, The Open University, MK7 6AA, Milton Keynes, UK, ²Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia, and ³Business School, University of Bristol, Howard House, Queens Avenue, BS8 1SD, Bristol, UK
Corresponding author email: emma.bell@open.ac.uk

The metaphor of the glass cliff is used to describe patterns whereby women are more likely to be selected for challenging leadership positions that have a higher risk of failure. This paper explores how the glass cliff metaphor contributes to a narrative of woman's fall that individualizes a leader's responsibility to avoid risks that may lead to failure. As an alternative, we introduce the leadership of refusal as a feminist resource for remaking the narrative of woman's fall. Refusal is understood as an embodied political and ethical stance that declines to recognize, rather than resists or simply opposes, masculine leadership norms. Through analysis of how three women leaders were represented by the media, former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, former Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, and climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, we analyse key moments of refusal where these leaders breached the masculine order through their embodied performances. We argue that leadership of refusal enables an understanding of how women leaders exercise power in agentic, non-sacrificial ways. We therefore urge leadership researchers to position refusal centrally, because first saying no in order to take risks towards achieving transformative action is, we suggest, a defining feature of leadership.

Introduction

This paper builds on previous research that analyses the role of media representations of women leaders (Adamson, 2017; Adamson and Kelan, 2019) in reinforcing gendered discourses and drawing attention to femininity in problematic and contradictory ways (Elliott and Stead, 2018; Elliott *et al.*, 2016). Media representations of women leaders provide a powerful 'means through which to examine the relationship between socio-cultural assumptions and the position of women in leadership roles' (Elliott and Stead, 2018, p. 20). They are also 'extremely powerful in popularizing and/or normalizing' ideas of what 'good' leadership looks like (Adamson, 2017, p. 315). This, in turn, influences how women see their suitability for leadership roles (Kelan, 2013). Metaphors such as the glass cliff, sticky floor and labyrinth have been widely used to make sense of women's experiences of leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2016). As Eagly and Carli (2016, p. 515) emphasize, 'because metaphors have the power to shape social perception, they can be subtly manipulated to alter attitudes and behaviours'. These authors sug-

gest that metaphors like the glass ceiling are less useful to women than the labyrinth, which focuses on men as the 'chief architects' of the situation, whereby women face complex challenges throughout their careers while also remaining optimistic about their ability to succeed (Eagly and Carli, 2016, p. 518). However, hitherto metaphors have been a largely implicit, rather than explicit, aspect of analyses of media representations of women in leadership (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Elliott and Stead, 2018). Deconstructing the use of gendered metaphors in media representations of leadership enables a better understanding of their effects as powerful image schema (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Cornelissen, Kafouros and Lock, 2005). Focusing on the widely used metaphor of the glass cliff (Adams, Gupta and Leeth, 2008; Elsaid and Ursel, 2018; Ryan and Haslam, 2005), this paper explores the metaphor's constitutive effects, which have the potential to perpetuate gender inequalities (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018).

We begin by reviewing the research methods that have been used to validate and legitimate the glass cliff metaphor and suggest that these experimental, positivist methods tend to reproduce an individualistic and psy-

chological focus on the individual leader. We demonstrate how this reinforces leadership narratives that give women the responsibility for accepting risky positions in order to ‘get to the top’, while failing to problematize the leadership cultures in which they are located (Glass and Cook, 2016; Ingersoll, Cook and Glass, 2023). Next, we show how media representations of the glass cliff have contributed towards the metaphor becoming performative by constituting the reality of women’s experience of leadership in addition to describing it. We explore the role that media constructions have played in the depiction of women leaders as the subject of an enduring cultural narrative of the fall.

In the second part of the paper, we introduce the idea of a leadership of refusal as a way of drawing attention to the possibility of a more agentic subject position that challenges the construction of the precarious woman leader. We explore the possibilities of refusal drawing on media representations of three women leaders—former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, and environmental activist, Greta Thunberg. We use these exemplars to trace three narrative trajectories—*from falling to refusal*; *from ‘good girl’ to refusal*; and *from quiet to noisy refusal*—in each case showing how they enact a leadership of refusal as an embodied performance. The paper contributes to critical leadership studies (Collinson, 2011, 2014) by showing how feminist theory can inform the development of more agentic, less sacrificial understandings of leadership. By problematizing how women’s leadership is conventionally studied and popularly interpreted, and by making explicit the gendered effects of a powerful leadership metaphor, we contribute to scholarship that challenges the dominance of masculine leadership norms and proposes feminist alternatives (Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021). We thereby contribute to understanding leadership as a performance of refusal that has transformative potential, especially for those who are marginalized within masculine leadership cultures.

Constructing ‘woman’ as the subject of the fall

The glass cliff is a compound spatial metaphor with an up–down orientation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) that signifies a decline in power and status. Developed by social psychologists as an extension to the glass ceiling, it refers to an observed pattern whereby women and people from racially and ethnically marginalized backgrounds are more likely to be selected for precarious senior positions that carry an increased risk of failure (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2009). If organizational failure occurs, ‘it is then women (rather than men) who must face the consequences and who are singled out for criticism and blame’ (Ryan and Haslam, 2007, p. 550). In such situations, women’s competency must ex-

ceed men’s in order for them to succeed. The glass cliff is thus seen as a ‘risk penalty’ that women and minoritized groups pay for accepting leadership positions, especially during times of crisis (Glass and Cook, 2016; Ingersoll, Cook and Glass, 2023). Women may be appointed to glass cliff positions because they are perceived to have the “‘people skills” to manage staffing issues that may arise in times of crisis (e.g. redundancies) or for more pernicious reasons, including the need to find a suitable scapegoat’ (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Rink, 2014, p. 213). Not only are appointees expected to navigate their organizations out of a crisis, but an inability to do so often results in blame and replacement (Cook and Glass, 2014). Early glass cliff research prompted a stream of quantitative studies directed towards establishing the robustness of the phenomenon and the causal patterns between variables, demonstrating the existence of the glass cliff in a variety of settings, including politics, government and professions (Ryan *et al.*, 2016).

Consistent with leadership studies more generally (Spoelstra, Butler and Delaney, 2021), much glass cliff research adopts a positivist epistemology (e.g. see Adams, Gupta and Leeth, 2008; Elsaid and Ursel, 2018; Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Feminist scholars have highlighted the problems associated with using objectivist empirical methods to capture the tensions and complex subjectivities of women’s lived experiences (Eagly and Riger, 2014; Harding, 1991). While useful for testing concepts within pre-defined parameters, a key concern with positivist approaches is that they can re-enact hierarchical relationships that disadvantage women in society by positioning researchers as experts (Eagly and Riger, 2014). This pattern can be seen in studies that seek to create laboratory conditions (e.g. Haslam and Ryan, 2008) to investigate ‘behaviour and cognitions that occur in natural social settings by modelling them’ in a controlled ‘laboratory’ environment (Eagly and Riger, 2014, p. 692). Such studies tend to treat women leaders as the subject of study, thereby denying their role as knowers or agents of knowledge (Harding, 1991).

Recent qualitative studies of the glass cliff, however, paint a more complex picture of how women engage with risk in leadership (Cook and Glass, 2014; Glass and Cook, 2016; Glass and Cook, 2020). They argue that past research may perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes about women leaders and their propensity towards risk aversion, reifying informal social beliefs and reducing opportunities for women (Ingersoll, Cook and Glass, 2023). This literature also draws attention to the performative consequences of the metaphor, which can create a ‘glass prison’ by reinforcing stereotypical assumptions that women feel unable to escape (Yaghi, 2018).

Since the mid-2000s, the glass cliff has entered public discourse and become popular as a means of making sense of the challenges faced by women in

leadership. In 2016, it was shortlisted for ‘Word of the Year’ by Oxford Dictionaries¹ and it is the subject of several TED talks.² The media has played an important role in communicating the idea of the glass cliff to general audiences by using it as a metaphor to make sense of women’s leadership in politics and business (Table 1). In some of these media accounts responsibility for the fall is attributed to the situation or structure but men tend to remain invisible. This pattern is aligned with a broader trend towards the greater visibility of women than men in times of organizational crisis or challenge (Simpson and Lewis, 2010).

The utility of glass metaphors, including the glass ceiling, glass escalator and glass cliff, ‘lies in their capacity to name and evoke systemic patterns that are otherwise invisible or elusive’ and redirect attention away from individual explanations and towards institutional accounts (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 15). While media representations help to raise awareness and provide an explanation of the obstacles faced by women leaders, we suggest that the extent to which they challenge individualistic accounts of successful leadership and the heroic narrative of leadership remains limited. This is because use of the glass cliff in media reports tends to reflect a neoliberal discourse that continues to individualize leadership, falsely equating leading with individual performance. Such individualization advocates solutions that focus on the leader’s traits and capabilities and reproduces a romantic view of leaders as saviours rather than promoting a relational, less hierarchical view of leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985; Sinclair, 2009). By emphasizing individual responsibility over and above structural or institutional causes, popular use of the glass cliff metaphor reflects a ‘confidence culture’ that focuses disproportionately on women’s skills and is ‘troublingly individualistic, turning away from structural inequalities and wider social injustices to accounts that foreground *psychological change* rather than social transformation’ (Orgad and Gill, 2022, p. 6, emphasis in original). It has thereby become a ‘justification for failure’ (Yaghi, 2018, p. 999), rather than a means of transforming gendered images of leadership that perpetuate women’s precarity.

¹[https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=gb&lang=en& \[accessed 16 September 2022\].](https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=gb&lang=en& [accessed 16 September 2022].)

²For example, a talk by Danielle Meggoe, entitled ‘Navigating the glass cliff’ advises women that ‘it’s all a mindset; you have the tools... to create mental fortitude... so that you can remain calm and logical’ and thereby avoid the glass. For example see Danielle Meggoe (2020) ‘Navigating the glass cliff’ https://www.ted.com/talks/danielle_meggoe_navigating_the_glass_cliff and Sophie Williams (2021) ‘The rigged test of leadership’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nMbKkgqork> [accessed 6 February 2023]

We seek here to ‘denaturalize’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000) the glass cliff metaphor by exploring its potential to reproduce a gendered status quo that is connected to an enduring cultural narrative about woman’s fall. The Christian story of Eve’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, for eating the forbidden fruit from the tree that God prohibited, is a fable ‘from which we never escape’ (Cixous, 1991, p. 155). The common, patriarchal reading of this story attributes blame to the woman for being seduced by the serpent and giving into temptation and persuading man to sin, leading to the downfall of humankind for which woman is punished. Thereafter, as feminist theologians argue, the narrative has been used to suppress women and legitimize their subordination by helping to justify unequal gender relations (Rooke, 2007). Even in contemporary secular society, Eve’s fall remains a common motif in Western art, literature and culture (Miller, 2011). The narrative reinforces constructions of risk that dictate that it is acceptable for men to take risks but that women should avoid them because risky behaviours are likely to be used to blame and expel them (Lupton, 2013).

Feminist theory has drawn attention to binary structures of masculine thought in which what is thinkable is organized into oppositions and women are relegated to the role of other (Sellers, 1991; Vachhani, 2018). It concentrates on reclaiming narratives that have been used to position women sacrificially, in ways which have persistently disadvantaged them in masculine-dominated societies and become an instrument for their oppression (Vachhani, 2009). This enables the story of the fall to be rethought in ways that recuperate women’s power and agency. Feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous (1991, 1992) uses the Christian story of the divine fall from grace to explore notions of innocence, which she also relates to confidence. Cixous’ work provides a starting point for remaking the narrative of the woman’s fall in leadership. It suggests that, in order to disrupt the trajectory that leads to the fall, we need to challenge the notions of guilt and innocence on which it is founded. Specifically, Cixous argues that confidence can only be lost for ‘as long as there is some left’ (Cixous, 1992, p. 31). Thus, when one begins to lose confidence, it is not a case of finding it again. ‘As one cannot go back in time, one cannot go back to lost confidence. But one can continue to advance along the trajectory of loss’ (Cixous, 1992, p. 38) and create the conditions by which it may be (re)claimed through what Cixous terms ‘corporeal intelligence’ (p. 69). Cixous’ feminist re-reading of the narrative of the fall draws attention to processes whereby culturally constructed narratives help to predetermine how events are interpreted. It also prompts us to reconsider how women’s leadership can be represented in ways that have the potential to destabilize masculine orders, as is explored in the next section.

Table 1. The glass cliff in news media 2004–2022

Source	No. of articles	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	22	<p>Fallen woman [Ellie Levenson, 2008] ‘Beware the glass cliff – you’ll get a lofty promotion, but failure will be guaranteed....’</p> <p>No more standing ovations for the woman who fell over the glass cliff at Lehman [Andrew Clark, 2010] ‘Erin Callan was the bank’s golden girl. Then things went horribly wrong... There is a sense of disappointment in her but also a flickering of sympathy that, partly because of her gender, she may have been shoved into an impossible, no-win position, dubbed “the glass cliff”. “The biggest mistake Erin Callan made was to accept that job”, says Vicky Ward... “They promoted somebody who wasn’t remotely qualified and they made a big to do about it”.’</p> <p>She broke the glass ceiling, now Hillary Clinton should beware the glass cliff [Lynn O’Connor Vos, 2016] ‘Is Hillary Clinton, who is poised to shatter the nation’s highest glass ceiling, destined to then step out onto the glass cliff? Researchers studying politics, business, law firms, school districts and regulatory agencies have all explored the glass cliff at work: <i>A woman takes a leadership role in a hard-to-succeed situation; she faces extra pressure, scrutiny and criticism; then she falters.</i>’</p> <p>‘Glass cliff’: Pink wave unlikely at next election with women in unwinnable seats [Katrina Curtis, 2022] ‘The next parliament is likely to have more women than the previous but the gains will probably be slim with men from both major parties disproportionately running in safe and winnable seats while women face a “glass cliff”... a new analysis by Australian National University’s Global Institute for Women’s Leadership finds ... this was a classic “glass cliff”, where women are appointed to leadership positions either in times of crisis or when that position is precarious.’</p>
<i>Financial Times</i>	21	<p>Women have a head for heights, says study: Psychologists say females tend to be drawn towards risk [Clive Cookson, 2004]</p> <p>‘Glass cliffs’ and the female leaders who are set up to fail [Andrew Hall, 2016] ‘if Hillary Clinton becomes US president, she will join Mrs May at the top of the glassiest of “glass cliffs”... As long as men hold most senior positions, women will be set up as fall-girls. Given their chance of a cushier job is more limited, they may feel obliged to accept cliff-edge roles.’</p> <p>Women with imposter syndrome told: don’t look down [Miranda Green, 2019] ‘Watching [Teresa May] fail has been painful... the task of delivering Brexit while keeping the country and the party together looked like a textbook “glass cliff”... Ms Sturgeon was frank... about her fear of falling from these great heights. She admitted to experiencing so-called “imposter syndrome”, anxiety about being exposed as a fraud. “Every time I stand up in parliament or do a television interview or a television debate, I feel vulnerable, because just in the blink of an eye I could just crash and burn”.’</p> <p>Political good girls are fighting a losing battle [Anne-Marie Slaughter, 2019] ‘Good girl syndrome is not the same as the glass cliff syndrome: the tendency of struggling companies to put a woman in power as a last resort to try to get things back on track. The two behaviours may be related, however, in that it is possible that only good girls are willing to take on the unpleasant and thankless task of trying to right the ship, out of a sense of duty more than a lust for power.’</p>
<i>The Times</i>	9	<p>Women are at the edge of a glass cliff, but is it their own choice to be there? [Holly Finn, 2004] ‘Psychologists from Exeter University have discovered that women who smash through the glass ceiling may be sorry that they did... Cue a flurry of outrage about the position of suited women in society, and accusations of general workplace discrimination (female politicians forced to run in less-winnable seats; female lawyers handed impossible cases).’</p> <p>Mayer could take \$122m for failure at Yahoo [Callum Jones and Simon English, 2016] ‘Marissa Mayer could walk away from Yahoo with \$122 million, an astonishing reward for failure, her critics will allege. She could become the latest victim of the “glass cliff” phenomenon, which punishes female executives deemed to have failed in circumstances when men would get another chance.’</p> <p>‘My mind hasn’t changed – if there’s a new referendum, we’re better off in’ Amber Rudd backs the May deal but won’t rule out another vote [Rachel Sylvester and Alice Thompson, 2018] ‘Amber Rudd thinks women in business or politics are often vulnerable to a “glass cliff”, which leaves them exposed in a leadership role and teetering on the edge at moments of crisis when the chance of failure is greatest.’</p>
<i>Business Insider</i>	9	<p>The ‘glass cliff’ is a serious problem for women in corporate America. Here’s how to dismantle it [Margerite Ward, 2020]</p> <p>Kamala Harris could be the first female VP of colour, and the changes ahead resonate with female BIPOC leaders [Margerite Ward, 2020]</p> <p>Netflix’s new show ‘The Chair’ reveals the subtle ways women of color are set up to fail as leaders [Margerite Ward, 2020]</p>
<i>Wall Street Journal (Online)</i>	6	<p>Female CEOs, still a rarity, face extra pressures; Yahoo’s Marissa Mayer encountered intense scrutiny for her decisions; ‘glass cliff’ can be a factor [Rachel Feintzeig and Joann S. Lublin, 2016] “‘She will be more likely to fail and we don’t see it as due to the conditions she was entering the position under,” said Nyla Branscombe, a psychology professor at University of Kansas who co-wrote the 2010 paper about glass cliffs that included that experiment. “Rather we’ll see it as, “Well, women just can’t do it””.’</p> <p>Cliff diving at Blue Apron; Blue Apron is the most recent example of the ‘Glass Cliff’ phenomenon in business – and it’s a precarious one at best [Laura Forman, 2019]</p> <p>Liz Truss isn’t alone – plenty of leaders flame out. Here’s how some come back. When it comes to reviving a damaged career, humility only goes so far [Callum Borchers, 2022]</p>

Table 1. (Continued)

Source	No. of articles	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
<i>The Christian Science Monitor</i>	4	<p>Jill Abramson: Why the New York Times ousted its first female top editor [Harry Brunius, 2014] ‘Given the power of Abramson’s position and her relatively brief tenure, many observers began to raise the elusive specter of sexism and the so-called “glass cliff” faced by women in high places.’</p> <p>Why Reddit just lost another female exec [Michelle Toh, 2015] ‘Chief engineer Bethanye Blount has submitted her resignation after only two months at the company... “I wouldn’t say my decision to leave was directly related to my gender” said Ms. Blount Speaking out on the two women from Reddit whose departures have stirred controversy – [former chief executive, Ellen] Pao and popular moderator Victoria Taylor – Blount said, “Victoria wasn’t on a glass cliff,” a term that refers to women being set up for failure by being put in precarious leadership positions. “But it’s hard for me to see it any other way than Ellen was”.’</p>
<i>The Australian Financial Review</i>	3	<p>Glass cliff [Sally Patten, 2018] ‘A landmark study, Australian Women CEOs Speak, by the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and executive search firm Korn Ferry, found that 43 percent of women in the survey were appointed CEO when the risk of failure was high. Not so much a glass ceiling as a glass cliff.’</p> <p>Hardie cements cultural diversity [Tony Boyd, 2018] ‘Ming Long, who is chairman of AMP Capital Funds Management, says the lack of Asian born CEOs and board directors “makes absolutely no sense”... Her big career break came during the GFC when she was appointed chief financial officer of the Investa Property Group, which at that time was heavily indebted and owned by Morgan Stanley. “It was a classic glass” “cliff situation,” she says. “The company was potentially going to fail but I managed to succeed. Without the GFC I would not be where I am today”.’</p>

Risk and refusal in women’s leadership

In order to avoid positioning women in ways that deny their agency and locate them as likely to fall, alternative ways of thinking about how to respond to risk are needed. Lupton (2013) maintains that risk is a gendered construct which disadvantages women. She considers how masculine norms of risk-taking may be challenged by enacting ‘edgework’ and alternative risky femininities. This observation is borne out by Glass and Cook (2016, 2020), who argue for deeper, richer understandings of the paths of women and racial/ethnic minority leaders who may be seen as occupying glass cliff positions. Their research, which is both quantitative and qualitative, shows that leaders are highly successful and skilled at navigating risk and see high-risk strategies as beneficial, if not essential, to career success. Consequently, their appointment to a ‘glass cliff position’ is not a one-off event or an isolated instance of a high-risk promotion, but rather the culmination of a specific risk-taking strategy that includes opportunities for mobility ‘that might otherwise be limited or even denied to them owing to their outsider status’ (Glass and Cook, 2020, p. 645). This ‘critical strategy’ that outsiders must employ is a form of embodied agency that arises from being subject, as minorities, to hyper-surveillance, being surrounded by doubt as to their capabilities, and being under additional pressure to perform because of their visibility (Glass and Cook, 2020, p. 638; Simpson and Lewis, 2010). As these studies highlight, leaders who are outsiders have limited strategies to gain credibility: assimilation or seeking to be ‘one of the boys’ is rarely effective (Heilman et al., 2004; Sinclair, 1998). Rather, taking on high-risk, transformational or crisis assignments can provide them with opportunities to make a difference, gain (sometimes precarious) visibility or

scrutiny with key decision-makers, and demonstrate exceptional performance (Ingersoll, Cook and Glass, 2023). For Glass and Cook (2020), attention should not be narrowly fixed on isolated moments in times when women and racial/ethnic minority leaders take up glass cliff positions. Instead, we need to explore the lengthy, temporal process whereby leaders embrace strategic options to engage in risk. In the section that follows, we explore how the subject position of the woman leader may be constructed in ways that provide an alternative to the role prescribed within masculine orders, by introducing the leadership of refusal.

A leadership of refusal

Anthropological, postcolonial, Indigenous and feminist scholars suggest refusal is a political and ethical stance whereby power is gained by turning away from the attempted imposition of authority (Honig, 2021; McGranahan, 2016; Simpson, 2007, 2014). Building on the notion of ethnographic refusal (Ortner, 1995), Simpson explores how refusal works in everyday encounters ‘to enunciate repeatedly to ourselves and outsiders that “this is who we are, this is who you are, these are my rights”’ (Simpson, 2007, p. 73). Her ethnographic analysis of the struggles of Mohawk people’s ability to assert their nationhood and identity shows how they refuse to be recognized by the Canadian State and ‘be enfolded into state logics’, thereby refusing to simply ‘disappear’ (Simpson, 2014, p. 185). Hence refusal is not negative but rather is aimed at reinvigorating democratic and civil virtues.

For feminist theorist Bonnie Honig (2021), practices of refusal differ from resistance in important ways. While refusal may begin with withdrawal from unjust political or organizational regimes, it informs a

long temporal and collective arc of embodied actions oriented towards achieving systemic, social transformation. For Honig (2021), inclination is an essential moment in the arc of refusal. It draws on the work of feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2016), who questions normative understandings of posture that privilege the erect vertical stance of ‘man’ as the basis of the autonomous moral subject. Cavarero argues that an inclined posture of maternity (which is stereotypically regarded as self-sacrificial and subservient) provides the foundations for a subversive ethical subject position. By drawing attention ‘to the arrangement of bodies’ (Honig, 2021, p. 53), inclination provides a postural perspective that challenges the demand for rectitude as the dominant stance within Western philosophy. While Cavarero sees inclination as oriented towards pacifism, mutuality and care, when positioned within the arc of refusal, it becomes a disposition towards others that acknowledges the inherently conflictual nature of attempts to change the status quo. Thus, the ‘mood of inclinational refusal is not per se altruistic’; rather, ‘[i]t is agonistic: intimate and contestatory’ (Honig, 2021, p. 60).

Bringing the concept of refusal into leadership studies complements and extends the notion of resistance leadership, which argues that resisting can, in itself, be a form of leadership (Harding, Ford and Lee, 2017; Sinha, Smolović Jones and Carroll, 2021; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Resistance leadership involves deliberate opposition or defiance towards deep structures of power (Courpasson, 2016; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Critical scholars who theorize different forms of domination and axes of oppression note that the structural domination of social groups does not remove the possibility of them exercising leadership (McGranahan, 2016; Prasad and Prasad, 2000). This is because leadership is not equivalent to authority and is often exercised by those at the bottom and edges of hierarchies, rather than at the top (Heifetz, 1994). A leadership of refusal builds on these insights by exploring possibilities for exercising agency towards transformational change in ways that are not a direct response to authority (McGranahan, 2016). Hence a refusal to occupy or a decision to withdraw from a formal authority position may be understood as an act of leadership that is potentially more effective than occupying a hierarchically designated role. Refusal also provides an alternative to neoliberal postfeminist discourses, which end up largely advocating for personal assertiveness as a means of overcoming gender inequalities in leadership and organization (Adamson and Kelan, 2019).

Unlike resistance leadership, which is primarily framed discursively and tends to overlook the importance of embodied performances of leadership (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; Sinclair, 2005; Sinclair and Ladkin, 2020), refusal is a fundamentally embod-

ied practice that involves changing a body’s relational disposition towards other bodies and objects. By attending to ‘refusal’s corporeal choreographies, postures and plane’, Honig (2021, p. 47) suggests that ‘texts we thought we knew are opened to new readings and subjected to productive dis/orientations’ (p. 49). A leadership of refusal thereby complements the work of critical leadership scholars who suggest we need to pay greater attention to how bodies and postures occupy space and convey meanings, such as dominance or inclusion, to followers and audiences (Pullen and Vachhani, 2021; Sinclair, 2005).

Honig argues that refusal can be generative and strategic when it involves making a set of moral claims for recognition. Rather than being defined solely as a response to authority or an updated version of resistance, a leadership of refusal embraces the social and political and is ‘a concept in dialogue with exchange and equality’ (McGranahan, 2016, p. 319). Refusal may involve interventions that are characterized by withdrawal, endurance and evasion, rather than by rejection, opposition or direct confrontation. It thereby offers a richer understanding of social and political relations in leadership that moves beyond the binary or an *a priori* landscape of domination/resistance (McGranahan, 2018). It achieves this by conceptualizing refusal as a form of recognition in itself, through alternatives (that include but are not limited to withdrawal) and limit points, such as by refusing to accept the premise on which actions are based. Thus, ‘we see individuals and collectives refusing affiliations, identities, and relationships in ways that are not about domination or class struggle... but instead about staking claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships, including political ones’ (McGranahan, 2016, p. 320; Scott, 1985). Hence, refusal is understood as linked to resistance but not interchangeable with it (Ortner, 1995). This is particularly salient for leadership in situations of opposition to conditions of inclusion/exclusion or self/other.

Research design and methods

Our research approach focused on “‘mainstream quality press” that are seen to have an authority and reliability that other media – in particular, social media – lack’ (Klein and Amis, 2021, p. 1327). For Gillard and Tame, we searched two Australian (*Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian Financial Review*) and two UK (*The Times* and *The Guardian*) newspapers where stories about their leadership were most widely told (Tables 2 and 3). In Thunberg’s case we selected from a wider global range of newspapers to reflect the greater international breadth of news media reporting on her leadership (Table 4). We used the Nexis and ABI/INFORM databases, filtered by source, to search for articles containing the leaders’ names as keywords and

Table 2. Media accounts of Julia Gillard's leadership, 2012–2013

Source and no. of articles	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
<p><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> (n = 24)</p>	<p>Treacherous heels the very height of misogyny [Anne Summers, 2012] ‘On a scale of one to 10 of diplomatic embarrassments, where President George Bush vomiting into the lap of the Japanese Prime Minister while seated next to him at a banquet back in 1992 is a 10, Julia Gillard slipping out of her shoes and taking a tumble in India this week should barely register. Yet to read some of the commentary you would think she had disgraced the nation. Instead of vigorous scrutiny of Gillard’s ground-breaking visit... <i>much of the country – including the media – is obsessed by her shoes.</i> Gillard herself made a wry comment about how heels are something men in the public eye don’t have to worry about... Some in the media even reminded us of her previous stumble in Sydney weeks back when, again, her heels were to blame. Others harked back to when the PM lost a shoe while being hustled into her car by police during a disturbance on Australia Day in Canberra.’</p> <p>PM a badass champion for women everywhere [Stephanie Gardiner, 2012] ‘The Prime Minister’s 15-minute speech condemning misogyny and attacking opposition leader, Tony Abbott, over his history of comments about abortion, women’s roles in the home and their ability to wield authority has impressed political pundits in the US and Britain.’</p> <p>Looking back with (male) anger [Elizabeth Farrelly, 2012] ‘Facebook’s “I Hate Julia Gillard” page has more than 19,000 likes. “Julia Gillard, Worst PM in Australian History” has more than 23,000 likes....’</p> <p>The rise and fall of Julia Gillard [Peter Harcher, 2013] ‘Factors that led to the downfall of Australia’s first female Prime Minister ... the controversy around the government’s chosen Speaker ... became a raging storm ... [The] pressure ... provoked Gillard into one of the signature moments of her Prime Ministership, the famous “misogyny speech”... Gillard stood and the speech flowed. It was spontaneous: “I will not be lectured on misogyny by this man.” ... a member of the Gillard leadership group, reflects: “I was astonished and distressed at the level of visceral hatred for her as a woman. I think the misogyny speech was genuine. <i>She was a woman who’d had enough.</i>”’</p>
<p><i>The Times</i> (n = 18)</p>	<p>Primal motives of a woman who had enough of scorn [Anne Barrowclough, 2012] ‘When Julia Gillard, Australia’s suddenly charismatic Prime Minister, cut the opposition leader to pieces in Parliament on Monday with the lethal skill of a sashimi chef, women around the world stood on their chairs and punched the air... So what drove Ms Gillard to make her tirade? <i>And are we witnessing the transformation of a dull, unremarkable premier into an unrecognisably compelling leader – or is this just a cipher?</i> “It was a cri de coeur,” the social commentator Jane Caro told <i>The Times</i>. “It came from the heart of someone who has fought for her place at the decision making table and over the years has been pushed and pushed and pushed.”... Supporters say that Ms Gillard finally had enough after years of abuse from people such as the Liberal politician, who described the childless premier as “deliberately barren”, the protesters accusing her of being “[Former Green Party leader] Bob Brown’s bitch” and a “witch”, or the claim by a shock-jock that she is just a “bloody stupid woman”... Her speech may live on, but it is not guaranteed that Ms Gillard will survive until next year’s election.’</p> <p>Gillard gets apology for sexist abuse menu [Anne Barrowclough, 2013] ‘<i>Sexism, never far from the surface of political debate in Australia, raised its head again yesterday</i> when an opposition politician was forced to apologize for a dinner menu that mocked the Prime Minister. The menu at the event to raise money for a former Cabinet minister’s comeback featured a poultry dish billed as “Julia Gillard Kentucky Fried Quail – Small Breasts, Huge Thighs and a Big Red Box”. The taunting menu emerged on Twitter a day after Ms Gillard attempted to put gender at the centre of the forthcoming election by suggesting that if Labor were to lose in September women would be marginalised by a misogynist Cabinet under Tony Abbott, of the Liberal Party.’</p> <p>Gillard reaches a new low as male voters desert in droves [Anne Barrowclough, 2013] ‘Male voters have deserted Australia’s ruling Labor Party, leaving support for Julia Gillard... <i>collapsing to devastating lows</i>... [A] pollster said that the swing against Labor came only among men.’</p>
<p><i>The Guardian</i> (n = 18)</p>	<p>Ad backlash after radio host insults PM Gillard [Alison Rourke, 2012] ‘Public anger has triggered an advertising backlash in Australia after the country’s best-known radio talk show host said the Australian prime minister’s father, who died last month, had died “of shame... Alan Jones told” a Sydney University Young Liberals dinner last week that “every person in the caucus of the Labor party knows that Julia Gillard is a liar... To think that he had a daughter who told lies every time she stood for parliament.” Jones accused the conservative opposition party of <i>being soft on the prime minister because she was a woman.</i>’</p> <p>Host sacked for asking PM if her partner is gay [Katherine Murphy and Helen Davidson, 2013] ‘A radio host was sacked yesterday after asking the Australian prime minister... whether her live-in partner, Tim Mathieson, is gay. Howard Sattler posed the question yesterday afternoon on the premise of clearing up rumours and things “you hear”... [He] then asked: “Tim’s gay?” Gillard replied: “Well that’s absurd.” “But you hear it,” Sattler said. “He must be gay, he’s a hairdresser”. “It’s not me saying it.”’</p> <p>Gillard’s gamble backfires as do-or-die vote curtails reign of Australia’s first female PM: Rival now sworn in as new prime minister after ballot. Deposed leader likely to retire from politics [Alison Rourke, 2013] Australian politics can often resemble a bloodsport. As the country’s first female prime minister... came to know this better than most, with critics missing no opportunity to stick the knife in during her three years at the top.’</p>
<p><i>Wall Street Journal</i> (Online) (n = 8)</p>	<p>Gillard gets boost in poll after ‘sexism’ speech [Enda Curran, 2012] ‘Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s verbal attack earlier this month on her opposition counterpart Tony Abbott, accusing him of sexism and misogyny, has given her a boost in a closely watched opinion poll ... The heated debate in parliament ... saw Ms. Gillard ... highlight a past statement by Mr Abbott when he questioned whether women have the physiology and temperament to lead, and also a comment referencing “the housewives of Australia” doing the ironing.’</p>

Table 3. Media accounts of Grace Tame's leadership, 2021–2022

Source and articles sampled	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> (n = 24)	<p>A tipping point for women? [Gay Alcorn, 2021] ‘Grace Tame, the Australian of the Year who as a schoolgirl was groomed and abused by her teacher, spoke to the National Press Club on Wednesday ... I watch the bravery of these young women determined to instigate change, telling their stories knowing they will face personal scrutiny.’</p> <p>‘Call me whatever you like’: Grace Tame on taking back control [Adam Gibson, 2022] ‘Grace Tame admits that “sometimes I can be too rigid in my opinions” but she makes no apology for her obstinacy in advocating for survivors of child sexual abuse, pointing to a law change in the Australian Capital Territory as her first victory.’</p> <p>Rage saved my life in the end: Grace Tame on not backing down [Jacqueline Maley, 2022] ‘Tame picked up a head of steam with her censure of Scott Morrison’s government or, as she calls it, the “Scott government”, her clap-back at the former PM’s habit of using women’s first names in his speech... Since shooting to fame as Australian of the Year in January last year, Tame has been offered gigs with L’Oréal Paris, Nike and the Young Global Leaders program, all of which she turned down ... Tame’s take-no-prisoners attitude is a straight-up survival mechanism, part of the armour she needs to protect herself from the ongoing effects of her sexual abuse.’</p>
<i>Australian Financial Review</i> (n = 16)	<p>Grace Tame: Frankness to fury [Pru Goward, 2022] ‘In the beginning, it was enthusiastic support for her Australian of the Year speech, and the moving clarity with which she forensically detailed the grooming that lies at the heart of the power imbalance in sexual abuse. A very young, beautiful woman speaking with such frankness and boldness....’</p> <p>Morrison is a collision between image and reality [Lauren Sams, 2022] ‘...the world’s most awkward photo opportunity with the outgoing Australian of the Year, Grace Tame. Some people who spend their lives being rude to other people thought that Tame was very rude in the way she dealt with the Prime Minister when he called out to her at an Australia Day function at The Lodge. A lot more celebrated <i>her refusal to pretend everything was OK.</i>’</p> <p>‘I realised I was wrong about Grace Tame: Daisy Turnbull, teacher and author [Lauren Sams, 2022] ‘“It was interesting,” she says, reflecting on Tame’s <i>refusal to smile</i> at a reception with Prime Minister Scott Morrison. “In the first five minutes, I thought, ‘Why didn’t you just smile?’ But then I thought, no, that is our internalised misogyny. We all have it. To always be well-behaved, to smile, be friendly. To do otherwise would be our weakness.” She pauses. “It was fascinating to me that for five minutes, I was in one camp, and then I realised I was wrong.”’</p> <p>I was diagnosed with autism at 50 [Emma A. Jane, 2022] ‘The activists Greta Thunberg and Grace Tame – both of whom have autism – <i>have been hammered in the media for insufficient smiling.</i>’</p>
<i>Guardian</i> (n = 10)	<p>Grace Tame and Scott Morrison’s frosty meeting sparks praise and condemnation [Kait Kelly, 2022] ‘In the pictures, Morrison and his wife, Jenny, are seen grinning broadly for media outside the Lodge while Tame and her fiancé ... appear stony-faced ... Tame has also used her platform to criticise the government’s handling of rape allegations within Parliament House made by former Liberal staffer Brittany Higgins and which are now the subject of criminal proceedings ... Several politicians denounced the outgoing Australian of the Year ... <i>labelling her “immature” and... calling her behaviour “childish”.</i>’</p> <p>Young women like Grace Tame weren’t socialised to shut up when authority figures speak – and it feels like progress; Australians like to think of ourselves as rebels but culturally we love rules, and aren’t always kind to rule-breakers [Katharine Murphy, 2022] ‘The prime minister extended his hand and congratulated the sexual assault survivor on her recent engagement to partner Max. Tame shook Scott Morrison’s hand without meeting his gaze. Tame was stony-faced, and seemed to take a very close interest in a spot on the ground away from Morrison. The prime minister piled more wattage into his smile, correcting for the lack of warmth adjacent to him, rendering the tableau even more unbalanced. Jenny Morrison, always gracious, also smiled at Tame, seeking to hold her gaze momentarily, and the young woman smiled back. Having traversed the grip and grin pleasantries in memorable and didactic fashion, a short session of steely side-eye ensued. In an era when everything is recorded, and everything is polarised, Tame’s decision to eviscerate Morrison with her body language was always going to be a #MeToo moment.’</p> <p>Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins: Nine key moments from the sellout press club event [Katherine Murphy, 2022] ‘Tame ... and Higgins ... did not mince words ... [they] fielded a number of questions about whether they planned to enter politics ... The <i>answer was no</i> ... “Certain members of the [media] have consistently labelled me as politically divisive, failing to mention that I spent most of last year having frank, productive meetings with politicians on all sides at both the state and federal level. So, after a year of being re-victimised, commodified, objectified, sensationalised, delegitimised, gaslit, thrown under the bus by the biased mainstream media – despite my inclusive messaging – I would like to take this opportunity to take a glass of water, and remind you that <i>I really have nothing to lose.</i>”’</p>
<i>The Times</i> (n = 2)	<p>Morrison under fire for his crass remark to abuse victim [Bernard Lagan, 2021] ‘This week Tame told... [a] podcast that she was upset with Scott Morrison’s response after she ended her [award] speech weeping. “Do you know what he said to me, right after I finished that speech and we’re in front of a wall of media? He leant over and right in my ear he goes: ‘Well, gee, I bet it felt good to get that out’,” she said.’</p>

Table 4. Media accounts of Greta Thunberg's leadership, 2019–2021

Source and articles sampled	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
<i>Wall Street Journal</i> (Online) (n = 8)	<p>Trump criticises climate activist Greta Thunberg, urges her to ‘chill’; President’s remarks about teenager follow Time magazine’s naming her its 2019 Person of the Year [Catherine Lucey, 2019] ‘President Trump said teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg should “work on her Anger Management problem,” reacting to a tweet congratulating Ms. Thunberg for being named Time magazine’s Person of the Year this week. Mr Trump said Thursday on Twitter that Ms. Thunberg should also “go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” Following Mr Trump’s tweet, Ms. Thunberg changed her Twitter bio Thursday to read: “A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend.”’</p> <p>Greta Thunberg leads climate protest, criticizing COP26 talks; Swedish climate campaigner has hardened her stance against the U.N. summit [Max Colchester, 2021] ‘Ms. Thunberg shot to fame three years ago as a schoolgirl <i>who cut classes to protest what she said was inaction on climate change</i>. She moved on to <i>bluntly dress down</i> world leaders. More recently, she has taken aim at the U.N. climate summit process itself, accusing it of being a talking shop with few concrete accomplishments to show for itself. On the eve of Friday’s rally, Ms. Thunberg called the summit “a two week celebration of business as usual and blah blah blah” on Twitter ... Now 18, Ms. Thunberg has appeared to change her tone in subtle ways during the summit, one of the first big events in which she hasn’t been accompanied by her father, Svante Thunberg. Ahead of Friday’s rally, she triggered an online debate about her increasingly salty language.’</p>
<i>The Times</i> (n = 5)	<p>Greta turns up volume with swears COP chant [Mike Wade, 2021] ‘On a day of bad chants, Greta Thunberg probably had the worst. “You can stick your climate crisis up your arse,” she sang out, to the delight of her young supporters, who apparently like their political message delivered in the simplest terms... “Inside Cop there are politicians pretending to take our future seriously,” Thunberg told the gathering in Cessnock’s Festival Park. “We say <i>no more blah blah blah, no more exploitation of people, nature and the planet. No more whatever the f*** they’re doing inside there.</i>”’</p>
<i>Guardian</i> (n = 18)	<p>‘The beginning of great change’: Greta Thunberg hails school climate strikes; The 16-year-old’s lone protest last summer has morphed into a powerful global movement challenging politicians to act [Jonathan Watts, 2019] ‘Thunberg has risen rapidly in prominence and influence. In December, she spoke at the United Nations climate conference, berating world leaders for behaving like irresponsible children.’</p> <p>‘The climate doesn’t need awards’: Greta Thunberg declines environmental prize [Agence France-Presse, 2019] ‘The Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg <i>has refused to accept an environmental award</i>, saying the climate movement needed people in power to start to “listen” to “science” and not awards.’</p> <p>Andrew Bolt’s mocking of Greta Thunberg leaves autism advocates ‘disgusted’; Australian News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt labels 16-year-old environmental activist ‘strange’ and ‘disturbed’ [Luke Henriques-Gomes, 2019] ‘News Corp’s Andrew Bolt showed “absolute ignorance” when he mocked the teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg in a column for the Herald Sun, an autism awareness advocate says. The high-profile columnist for Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers and Sky News commentator attacked the 16-year-old campaigner as “deeply disturbed”, “freakishly influential” and “strange” in the piece....’</p> <p>Greta Thunberg says she will not attend COP26 Climate summit [Agence France-Presse, 2021] ‘The Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg has said she <i>will not attend the Cop26 climate summit</i> in Glasgow in November, saying the uneven distribution of Covid-19 vaccines would mean countries could not participate on even terms.’</p>
<i>Asia News Monitor</i> (n = 7)	<p>Sweden: Swiss students follow example of young climate activist Greta Thunberg [Anonymous, 2019] ‘Greta came to the public’s attention last year when she <i>refused to go to school</i> until the Swedish government focused its agenda on the world’s climate crisis.’</p> <p>Sweden: Teenage Climate Change Activist Thunberg Named Time’s Person of the Year [Anonymous, 2019] ‘During her appearance before U.S. lawmakers, Thunberg, who has Asperger syndrome, <i>refused to read prepared remarks</i>. She, instead, submitted the U.N.’s 2018 global warming report to them and declared, “I don’t want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists, and I want you to unite behind the science.”’</p>
<i>Business Insider</i> (n = 6)	<p>Greta Thunberg responds to ‘haters’, asking why adults ‘spend their time mocking and threatening teenagers and children for promoting science’ [Morgan McFaul-Johnsen, 2019] ‘Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old climate activist from Sweden, delivered a fiery, tearful speech to world leaders at the United Nations Climate Action Summit this week. She also filed a legal complaint against five of the world’s biggest carbon emitters. Thunberg has faced severe backlash, especially from conservatives in the US. A right-wing commentator called her “mentally ill” on Fox News. But Thunberg has called her Asperger’s syndrome a “superpower.”’</p> <p>2 striking photos taken just over a year apart show how Greta Thunberg’s climate strike inspired millions [Morgan McFaul-Johnsen, 2019] ‘In August 2018, Greta Thunberg sat outside Swedish parliament with a sign reading “school strike for climate.” It was her first Friday <i>walking out of school for climate action</i>, and she made a weekly routine out of it.’</p> <p>Greta Thunberg, who was just named Time’s 2019 person of the year, says she’s ‘tired of selfies’ and meetings with politicians [Aylin Woodward, 2019] ‘Thunberg said she <i>tries to say no to meetings with politicians</i> when she can... “It’s just small talk, basically,” Thunberg said. “And, of course, they want to take selfies.”’</p>

Table 4. (Continued)

Source and articles sampled	Representative headlines, author, year and quotes (emphasis added)
Gulf News (n = 3)	<p>Meet the climate warrior [Jonathan Watts, 2019] ‘Greta Thunberg cut a <i>frail and lonely figure</i> when she started a school strike for the climate outside the Swedish parliament building last August. Her parents tried to dissuade her. Classmates declined to join. Passers-by expressed <i>pity and bemusement at the sight of the then unknown 15-year-old</i> sitting on the cobblestones with a hand-painted banner. Eight months on, the picture could not be more different....’</p> <p>Who is Greta Thunberg: A 16-year-old with ‘superpowers’ preaching and practicing climate action [Dona Cherian, 2019] ‘Greta was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome in 2012 which has been categorised as being on the autism spectrum... she has previously said in interviews that she now accepts the part of her that <i>refuses to let go</i>. “Some people can just let things go, but I can’t, especially if there’s something that worries me or makes me sad”....’</p>

focusing on pivotal events that attracted media attention and focused on their leadership performances. Using ethnographic content analysis (ECA, Altheide, 1996), we treated the news articles as a cultural resource that contributes to the construction of a symbolic order which shapes how we see ourselves and others. Because such meanings emerge over time, it is important to study their emergence as a temporal process. We therefore identified a time period on which to focus during which a significant change in each leader’s positioning occurred. We read and noted the main events and stories told in each article for which the leader was positioned centrally in the narrative, excluding any articles that were limitedly relevant. The case of Gillard focuses on the nine-month period from her ‘misogyny speech’ in October 2012 to the point she was sacked by her party in June 2013. We focused on the period of Tame’s tenure as Australian of the Year and its subsequent evaluation (January 2021 to December 2022). The third case covers a three-year period, January 2019 to December 2021, when Thunberg rose to global media prominence.

The concept of refusal was developed abductively, tacking back and forth between media sources and the literature and making constant comparisons in order to select the ‘best’ explanation of patterns identified (Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013). Following an ECA approach meant that analysis was iterative and sampling was purposeful, guided by emerging theory and the need to simultaneously obtain ‘categorical and unique data for every case studied’ (Altheide, 1996, p. 17). The narrative of the fall is a form of ‘emplotment’, a means of narrating the past that is schematic and involves envisioning connections between events as an initial rise followed by descent (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 16). To investigate how such temporal trajectories emerge we focused on the ‘plotlines’ used to string events together (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 13). Such narrative trajectories are continually in a state of becoming (Hernes, 2022). Through this process, we identified three narrative trajectories to express ongoing connections between past and future events in which leaders were implicated. We also explored how leaders sought to shape the enactment and expression of their narrative trajectory.

A further aspect of our analysis involved focusing on visual messages contained within these narratives. Media articles are typically multimodal, containing photographs and written text, including headlines and captions, that carry interrelated, distinct meanings (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). We treated press photographs as ‘messages’ that are actively crafted by news journalists and photographers and transmitted to general audiences with the intention of shaping societal opinion (Barthes, 1977; Klein and Amis, 2021). Previous research draws attention to the importance of media photographs in constructing leader identity and conveying authenticity through embodied postures, clothing and gestures (Davison, 2010; Guthey and Jackson, 2005). It also explores how media images of women leaders can be used to undermine their participation in leadership through gendered scrutiny of their bodies, clothes, posture and perceived physical vulnerability, such as by photographing them falling (Bell and Sinclair, 2016a, 2016b). We started by narratively describing the actors represented in photographs that appeared alongside written text of selected media articles, including who/what was shown and what they were doing (Altheide, 1996). Using a semiotic approach, we analysed the pose and physical gestures of the subject towards other actors who were photographed (Barthes, 1977). We then looked for key *moments of refusal*—turning points when a breach occurred that disrupted established performance norms (Mangham, 1990; Sinha, 2010). We focused in on a small number of photographs and videos that had become iconic ‘as a consequence of their frequent appearances in the media, representation of a significant event, and propensity for social impact’ (Klein and Amis, 2021, p. 1328). Analysis of these images focused on identifying the visual rhetoric used to construct an impression of the leader and make them visible to others (Davison, 2010). Using Davison’s framework we analysed the visual codes contained in the photographs (Table 5) related to the leader’s *physical appearance* (e.g. stature), how they *dress, interpersonal elements* including ‘bodily movement and gestures towards others’ (Davison, 2010, p. 171), and *spatial context* (e.g. props and artefacts). This analytical approach

Table 5. Embodied falling and refusal in media photographs

No.	Image, month/year and credits	Accessed [3 October 2022]:	Visual codes
1	Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivers 'misogyny speech' to Parliament, October 2012	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/30/i-will-not-how-julia-gillards-words-of-white-hot-anger-reverberated-around-the-world	<p><i>Physical</i> – Gillard is standing erect and appears relaxed. She uses hand gestures throughout; her beautifully manicured hands signify femininity and power. She extends her arm and points to the seated Opposition Leader, gazing around the Parliament as she speaks. Her stance conveys calm and authority.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – Mid-blue tailored suit conveys professionalism; deep pink T-shirt underneath conveys femininity.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – She stands authoritatively at the dispatch box. Across the floor of the House, the Opposition leader grins sheepishly, apparently surprised at what he has unleashed and then becomes stony-faced. The Opposition jeering falls silent after a while, which magnifies the gravity of what is occurring.</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – Gillard's performance holds and fills the floor as all around her are seated, squashed together on government and opposition benches.</p>
2	Video: Prime Minister Julia Gillard falling on a visit to India, October 2012	https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/julia-gillard-spread-eagled-as-she-fell-after-losing-her-shoe-on-a-visit-to-new-delhi-in-india/news-story/107d93cac4deed64c9099a0a1b7c37a3	<p><i>Physical</i> – Four blurred images depict the sequence of the fall from Gillard's initial stumble, arms flailing, to lying prone face down on the grass. In the final image her body is supported on either side by two men who help her to stand up again.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – Fitted black dress and tailored cream jacket. Gillard's choice of high-heeled shoes signify her equivalence to male leaders through physical height gain together with sexual connotations. She continues to wear them despite repeated public falls.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – Accompanied by Indian officials on either side, Gillard is positioned as vulnerable and requiring protection, as confirmed by her fall.</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – Gillard appears acutely vulnerable as she falls and lies on the ground, while the men look down on her.</p>
3	Grace Tame and Scott Morrison at Australia Day function at The Lodge, February 2022	https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/25/grace-tame-and-scott-morrison-frosty-meeting-sparks-praise-condemnation-and-memes	<p><i>Physical</i> – Tame stands awkwardly alongside the Prime Minister ostensibly to join with him in congratulating incoming Australians of the year. She holds herself stiff. Her hair is pulled tightly back. She refuses to shake hands with him or smile. Her gaze is downward, her expression scowling.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – Wearing black trousers and a red cropped jacket with multi-coloured appliqued stars, Tame looks brooding and non-conformist. She wears flat black boots. Her dress, stance and demeanour convey disgruntlement and disgust with the Prime Minister. She refuses to 'play the game' of being gracious.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – The group photograph includes Morrison's wife in heels and a flowing white dress as the epitome of femininity. Both are smiling while Tame and her partner stand apart, grim-faced. Her partner wears wrap around dark glasses conveying distance and disassociation.</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – To the side of the participants is the Australian flag in front of Government House. Tame and her partner's positioning sets them apart from the PM and these symbols of government, signifying their refusal to be used as props.</p>
4	Grace Tame at National Press Club in Canberra, Australia, February 2022	https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/feb/09/grace-tame-and-brittany-higgins-nine-key-moments-from-the-sellout-press-club-event	<p><i>Physical</i> – Tame's bodily demeanour conveys a refusal to enact what typically occurs at such events. She looks angry, scowls, and makes no effort to smile or appear 'nice'. At the podium, she leans in and tells the audience what has happened behind the scenes as if imparting a secret.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – In a sleeveless grey pant suit, hair pulled back, Tame is saying 'don't look at me'. She dares the audience to ask about her left arm being in a sling, refusing to explain her bodily state in the face of relentless media scrutiny.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – Despite a standing ovation from a captivated audience, Tame appears unmoved, refusing to endorse what might be seen as a celebration of the two women's bravery and achievements.</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – Tame shares the stage with Brittany Higgins (dressed more studiously in a white pantsuit). She sits back on the couch when not speaking as if she would rather be somewhere else. At the podium she performs a rapidly alternating set of emotions—from furious and assertive, to secretive and more confidential.</p>

Table 5. (Continued)

No.	Image, month/year and credits	Accessed [3 October 2022]:	Visual codes
5	Greta Thunberg speaking at UN Summit on Climate Change, September 2019	https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/how-dare-you-greta-thunberg-rips-into-world-leaders-over-climate-inaction/rj02a6dtk	<p><i>Physical</i> – Seated and holding a few notes, Thunberg's facial expressions convey hurt and disgust. Her teeth are gritted, her mouth twisted, eyes moist.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – A simple pink shirt, a single plait down one shoulder, informal in contrast to her audience.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – n/a</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – Being behind a desk with nothing around or behind her reinforces Thunberg's message through a sense of aloneness, as a child who should be at school and not required to be a lone voice holding out against global inaction. She appears unmoved by the applause.</p>
6	Greta Thunberg meets with members of UK Parliament, December 2019	https://www.businessinsider.com/greta-thunberg-tired-of-selfies-and-politicians-2019-12?r=US&IR=T	<p><i>Physical</i> – Standing and applauded by three European politicians, Thunberg gazes to one side, her face impassive. She appears static, unmoved and uninterested.</p> <p><i>Dress</i> – Thunberg's trademark plaits, long-sleeved check shirt and pants convey no interest in dressing formally for the occasion.</p> <p><i>Interpersonal</i> – Surrounded by suited and much taller politicians, Thunberg's stiff, immobile stance makes their applause seem overly effusive or manufactured. Thunberg disrupts the celebratory look with her blank expression and piercing eyes.</p> <p><i>Spatial</i> – All four are standing behind a desk that has the accoutrements of a serious business meeting, with PowerPoint screen and logos. There is a sense of discomfort conveyed by Thunberg's small figure being applauded by 'suits'.</p>

enabled us to deepen our understanding of how leaders were emplotted in the narratives and to explore how they exercised agency in changing or modifying the narrative trajectory.

Narrative trajectories of leadership refusal

We present here the trajectories of three women leaders based on analysis of how their actions were narrated by the media. Tables 1–5 present the primary data and sources, which the following analysis draws upon. Our analysis explores how, through embodied refusal, these leaders present alternatives to the dramatic trajectory (Hernes, 2022) which involves constructing elements in succession to show the ascent of the leader to a position of power, status and authority, culminating in a dramatic and damaging fall. It shows instead how the corporeal practice of a leadership of refusal provides leaders with a way to move through time and enact their own emplotment in ways that challenge the masculinist logic of the fall.

Julia Gillard: From falling to refusal

Media narratives about Julia Gillard emplot her leadership narrative as a devious rise to power through her challenge of the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, winning the vote of her party to assume the Prime Ministership in the middle of a governing term. This rise was followed by a spectacular fall that can be read as a gendered attack of her leadership, where opposition politi-

cians publicly referred to her as a 'bitch', a 'witch' or 'bloody stupid woman', a form of misogynistic hatred that was reinforced on social media (Table 2). Attacks in the latter period of her Prime Ministerial career (2012–2013) extended to her personal relationships—with her father, who was suggested to have 'died of shame', and with her partner, who was implied by a radio show host to be gay because he was a hairdresser—as well as to Gillard's own sexuality and fertility, with one politician referring to her as 'deliberately barren' (Table 2).

A defining event that changed the course of Gillard's narrative trajectory came in 2012, when she delivered her now famous 'misogyny speech' in the Australian Parliament. Gillard's speech was a response to having been repeatedly pushed towards a fall by male politicians in the Opposition, her own party, and the media. As she has reflected subsequently, her preparation for parliamentary Question Time that day began as any other. Gillard (2022) had expected that the misogyny and sexism that had dogged her Prime Ministership would die down if she ignored it, as people came to accept a woman political leader. However, when she gathered herself to respond to accusations about the Speaker of the House, she turned her attention to the Opposition Leader, stood at the dispatch box, and spoke without restraint about the political culture that had plagued her leadership. Gillard's rhetoric was characterized by repeated statements of refusal beginning 'I will not...' and concluding with the phrase 'not now, not ever', which became a widely used feminist slogan and the title of her third book (2022). Gillard was known for her power

dressing,³ including her use of immaculately manicured hands. She used her hands throughout her speech, repeatedly pointing to the Opposition leader, who grinned initially and then appeared increasingly stony-faced as the jeers died down and the floor fell relatively silent in witness to what was occurring (Image 1, Table 5). While Gillard's initial stance was upright and erect, as the speech progressed her posture became more inclined towards others, through her forward and sidewise movement, with her body inviting members from both sides of the House to join with her (Table 5). Although the speech was initially downplayed by the local press, it located Gillard as the embodiment of refusal and an international icon of feminist leadership (Sinclair, 2014).

This moment of refusal was not enough to prevent Gillard from losing her political position, and the metaphor of the fall continued to be used by the media to position her. For example, photographs taken by journalists during a visit to India in 2012 of Gillard falling in high heels were published as a front-page feature in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Image 2, Table 5). In the following year, Gillard was forced into a contest for the leadership of her own Party, which she subsequently lost. However, the 'misogyny speech' became a feminist rallying cry that enhanced Gillard's leadership internationally far more than many of her reforms while in office and provided the foundations for her ongoing leadership and collaboration with other women in her books and via the Global Institute for Women's Leadership. Gillard's case shows the importance of locating refusal within an arc of leadership actions, highlighting how leaders can influence the emplotment of their narrative and engage reflexively in shaping it (Hernes, 2022) through intentional performances of refusal over time. Gillard's ongoing leadership, based on collaboration with other women, shows how she continued to direct her leadership narrative through further expressions of refusal, for example promoting changes to sexual consent laws in Australia, whereby the right to say 'no' becomes a legal and ethical entitlement (Gillard, 2022).

Grace Tame: From 'good girl' to refusal

Media stories about Grace Tame in the period 2021–2022 emphasize her 'frankness and boldness' (Table 3) in speaking about her experiences of having been serially raped and abused as a schoolgirl by her maths teacher. Her award as Australian of the Year recognized her campaigning work prompted by her experience of seeking help and legal action against the man

who abused her, which led to a change in Tasmanian legislation enabling victims of sexual assault to speak out. Medial narratives also draw attention to Tame's youth and beauty (Table 3). Initially, she began most public appearances by repeatedly describing the circumstances of the abuse she suffered and the failures of the school and authorities to act, subjects that provoked discomfort for many people, keeping the events at the forefront of public conversation. However, as the trajectory of her leadership unfolded, Tame became more outspoken, refusing to moderate her anger or be positioned as an institutionally acceptable voice for reform. Over the course of her speaking engagements during the year, her appearance shifted away from glamour as her clothing, hair and shoes became less feminized (Images 3 and 4, Table 5).

As the narrative trajectory of her leadership developed, Tame repeatedly refused to 'let go, to roll over' (Simpson, 2016, p. 330) and play the game she was asked to. She continued to be outspoken about the then Government's tardy responses to reviews recommending changes in parliamentary culture. A key moment of refusal arose when meeting Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, early in 2022, when she did not hide her frustration at the lack of government action. She refused to smile in greeting him, instead scowling for media photos and physically distancing herself from the Prime Minister. Her gaze in photographs is an act of intensification (Image 3, Table 5), a performance that fends off conventional spectatorial looking (Honig, 2021, p. 34). Some journalists drew attention to the gendered inequalities embedded in these expectations, to be 'well-behaved' and 'friendly', while others linked her unwillingness to smile to her autism diagnosis (Table 3).

Another moment of refusal occurred after her official Australian of the Year status ended, when she and Ministerial staffer Brittany Higgins presented at the National Press Club in February 2022. The event was reported widely in the media as game changing. Both women began by describing the rape and abuse they had suffered. Neither held back; instead, they embraced the risk of speaking out in this manner. What they said and how they said it repeatedly breached the normalized order of masculinized political discourse and refused the protocols prescribed for such events. For example, when describing how she was phoned by a senior decision-maker and warned not to say anything bad about the then Prime Minister, Tame leant forward confidentially, as if imparting a secret. In a stance of embodied inclination, she kept changing her posture at the lectern, repeatedly surprising the audience by altering the manner of her speech, on occasion being cheeky, making jokes and winking at the audience. She referred to the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader by their first names as 'Scott' and 'Anthony', explicitly flouting convention and mirroring the former Prime Minister's habit of using

³Goodall, J. (2013) 'Dressing the part: women, power, fashion – and that bloody jacket!' *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/dressing-the-part-women-power-fashion-and-that-bloody-jacket-13659> [accessed 8 September 2023]

women's first names in speech (Table 3). Tame wore a sling with a bad graze visible on her upper arm, which could be read as an explicit challenge to her audience to ask how she had been injured (Image 4, Table 5). Her speech, which received a standing ovation, was an extended act of refusal in multiple ways. Her stated message of 'I really have nothing to lose' recalls Cixous' (1992) argument that confidence is restored only after all is lost (Table 3). Tame also declined various corporate partnerships, actions interpreted by journalists as a 'survival mechanism... part of the armour she needs to protect herself' (Table 3). Tame's contribution to the emplotment of her own narrative was enabled by refusal—the mechanism whereby she sought to 'grasp together events' (Hernes, 2022, p. 137) and change both the narrative of her leadership and its impact on audiences and followers.

Greta Thunberg: From quiet to noisy refusal

The trajectory of Greta Thunberg's leadership (2019–2021) begins by emphasizing her youth and gender as the 'girl' or 'teenager' who became 'the face' or 'the voice' of climate change activism (Table 4, see also Ryalls and Mazarella, 2021). Her activism has consistently been characterized by refusal, from the point when she first stood outside the Swedish parliament building holding a handwritten banner that proclaimed 'School strike for the climate' for three weeks prior to her country's forthcoming parliamentary elections. However, as Thunberg reached adulthood and was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year, cementing her status as a climate change leader and making her a media celebrity (Zulianello and Ceccobelli, 2020), media representations drew increasing attention to the bluntness and 'increasingly salty language' (Table 4) that characterized her performances of refusal. The embodied emotions in Thunberg's evolving refusals range from fury to resignation to dark humour—for example when she declined a major environmental award saying 'the climate does not need any more awards', and when she refused to attend COP26 in Glasgow, UK, later telling journalists that 'we say no more blah blah blah' (Table 4).

Thunberg's leadership is characterized by a persistent inclination to refuse to accept established power orders and those who uphold them. Embodied action is key to this, including her physical presence outside buildings where political power is held. Thunberg's stance of refusal is physical, involving facial expressions and body language (Image 5, Table 5). Her embodied stance is also evident in encounters with politicians (Image 6, Table 5) and through her condemnation and refusal to accede to their requests for 'selfies' with her (Table 4). As with Tame, Thunberg's performances of refusal have been linked in media stories to her diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (Table 4), as an explanation of her singu-

larity of focus on issues and apparent unconcern about what others think of her (Ryalls and Mazarella, 2021). In some media commentaries this been used to discount Thunberg's leadership, by using her diagnosis to deride what she does or attribute it to psychological abnormality (Ryalls and Mazarella, 2021, p. 446; Table 4).

Discussion: Building repertoires of refusal

This article arose from our desire to offer new insights and potential inspiration to researchers and women in leadership. Drawing on the concept of the glass cliff, our analysis suggests that media representations of this influential metaphor position women as destined to fall and construct a spectacle that renders them the passive subject of a controlling masculine gaze (Bell and Sinclair, 2016a; Cixous, 1992; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021). These portrayals reflect a deep cultural antipathy towards women's leadership in masculine-dominated environments.

Our analysis shows that research that aims to redress the inequalities that women face may be misused to perpetuate common myths about how women leaders fail and what they need to do in order to 'succeed'. While the glass cliff metaphor may initially have helped to reveal hidden systemic barriers to women's leadership, its popularization within the media potentially reinforces the precarity of women leaders through its incorporation into neoliberal cultural commentaries that lay responsibility on women leaders for their failures and falls (Adamson, 2017; Orgad and Gill, 2022). We thereby seek to go beyond 'the goal of "reducing gender inequality"' (Walby, 2011, p. 4) and attend to the politics of gender that arise when the wider structural and institutional landscape is left unchallenged. Our approach seeks to displace the dominance of the masculine subject in order to advance the interests of all those who are othered, oppressed and exploited (Braidotti, 2020). This broadly encompassing positioning of feminism provides the basis for understanding the subjects of a leadership of refusal as 'not women as such, but those shaped by feminist theory and practice' (Honig, 2021, p. 3).

We have argued that, rather than accepting the inevitability of the fall as an outcome of precarity within the masculine order, women leaders can, and do, refuse to accept the legitimacy and authority of those around them and act in embodied, agentic ways to challenge and transform the status quo. Building on the recognition that learning about leadership in the public domain arises from contemporary media and its constructions of leadership through images and narratives (Bell and Sinclair, 2016b), our analysis has focused on three highly influential women who have declined to conform to gendered expectations of leadership. The stances of Julia Gillard, Grace Tame and Greta Thunberg can

be read as sustained, embodied repertoires of refusal. Thus, while the embodied aspects of leadership that disadvantage women are widely recognized (Eagly, 2011; Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013), this paper has contributed to understanding the possibilities for women to exercise corporeal power in agentic, non-sacrificial ways. By focusing on key moments in which refusal is enacted, and gendered leadership norms associated with the masculine social order are thereby breached, these embodied performances challenge masculinized assumptions about the necessity of sacrifice in leadership (Grint, 2020).

Refusal disrupts the operation of power by denying the presumption of authority. Whereas resistance seeks to undo established relations of domination and power, refusal denies their legitimacy in the first place. It thereby avoids reinscribing weakness in the way that resistant identities encourage and enables women leaders to build more self-directed, agentic narratives. The narrative trajectories of the three women leaders presented here show how refusal can be used to move away from the dominant model of business celebrity based on 'female heroes' and construct a different view of 'the kind of woman one needs to be to achieve success' (Adamson and Kelan, 2019, p. 982). It suggests that refusal is a practice that is realized through everyday micro-interactions as much as through grand gestures, and its practice requires cultivation and adaptation (Pullen and Vachhani, 2021). However, younger women and women earlier in their careers, in particular, are pressured to conform and discouraged from refusing (Ryalls and Mazzarella, 2021), potentially disempowering them and rendering them more compliant within male-dominated organizations. Hence, we suggest, it is only by cultivating the capacity for refusal over time that its potential for leadership may be realized, including in formal organizational contexts.

Our analysis contributes to critical feminist leadership studies by drawing attention to embodied performances that breach masculine social orders. It highlights the importance of the leader's body as a site where the leadership of refusal is performed, thereby providing a counterweight to dominant ways of thinking about leadership that focus on leaders' minds and treat leadership as a cerebral, disembodied practice (Collinson, 2014). Following Cavarero (2016), the concept of inclination can be used to challenge masculine, heroic accounts of leadership. By critiquing the effects of the figuration of human beings as upright and erect and instead positioning people as inclined in their relations to one another, our analysis exposes the ethical possibilities of a leadership of refusal. Refusal thereby undermines the narrative of falling as failure and provides a basis for alternative models of leaders and leadership that are inclined towards others. By dismissing a morality based on 'an I whose position

is straight and vertical' (Cavarero, 2016, p. 6), an inclined leadership of refusal contributes towards the development of more radically relational approaches to leadership (Lui 2018; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021) that position it as a constitutive and 'essential dimension of the human' (Cavarero, 2016, p.13).

Finally, our three cases highlight how women in powerful positions who experience intense gendered scrutiny and sexist portrayals of their leadership in the media and on social media can refuse to be rendered inactive or speechless by this. For example, Thunberg retaliated against entrepreneur and influencer Andrew Tate's attempted online domination tactics, which involved making deliberately inflammatory remarks about the enormous emissions of his sports car collection on Twitter, by making explicit the links between competitive masculinity (Berdahl *et al.*, 2024) and climate denial, through her withering 'smalldickenergy@getalife.com' response. This became one of the most liked and shared tweets of all time and was reported by news media around the world.⁴ Similarly, Gillard has refused to be rendered unfit for leadership since being ousted from her position as Prime Minister and has instead shifted her focus towards developing ways for women to exercise leadership internationally (Gillard, 2022). While sexist portrayals of women corporate and political leaders remain widespread (Elliott *et al.*, 2016; Elliott and Stead, 2018), the leadership of refusal provides insight into avenues of response that are characterized neither by withdrawal nor by simply enduring.

Refusal, as a generative, deliberative and embodied move towards something different, rather than solely an oppositional politics or move away from something (McGranahan, 2016), challenges dominant leadership cultures in a way that goes beyond resistance. It liberates women's subjectivities from the masculine social order by acknowledging corporeality and engaging feminism as a resource to challenge the status quo yet 'stay in the game' (Fotaki and Harding, 2018; Liu, 2018; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021). Refusal does not necessitate withdrawal, or separation of leaders from those who are led, such as by drawing hierarchically defined boundaries between leaders and followers (Grint, 2020). Rather, it signals an understanding of what is at stake and the possibility of active participation by critiquing dominant assumptions about what is involved in leadership. It offers the potential to make alternative worlds and build collective capacity, and to rethink leadership practices as 'not just ways of being and acting in the world, but [as] active political projects which often operate by the explicit rejection of other ones' (Graeber, 2013, p. 1; Ortner, 1995). As McGranahan (2016, p. 320) notes,

⁴Solnit, R. (2022) 'Greta Thunberg ends year with one of the greatest Tweets ever', *The Guardian*, 31 December [accessed 11 January 2024]

this ‘is often a part of political action which articulates refusal as both troubled conscience and rejection of status quo conditions... Refusal marks the point of a limit having been reached: we refuse to continue on this way’.

While the examples used here, of Tame and Thunberg, are of young leaders who are arguably less institutionally constrained than political or business leaders who are the predominant focus of glass cliff research, we suggest there is much that can be learned from this for leaders in institutionally embedded roles. It is, however, a limitation of our research that all three of the leaders analysed are White. As Ladkin and Bridges Patrick (2022, p. 206) observe, ‘much current leadership theorizing is actually “White” leadership theorizing and does not speak to the totality of how leadership is expressed’. As postcolonial and feminist theory highlights, the leadership of refusal is a strategy that can, and has, been used by those with limited formal power. Intersectional analyses of the enactment of refusal could contribute further insight into its possibilities for all those whose embodied identities do not conform to White masculine norms of leadership.

Conclusion

We began this paper by identifying the limitations of dominant methods that are used to validate and legitimate the glass cliff metaphor as an explanation of women’s experiences of leadership. We further sought to expose the cultural narrative of the fall that the glass cliff metaphor helps to perpetuate. Taking a feminist perspective, we have proposed that leadership research needs to be evaluated according to whether it encourages women leaders to gain ‘more control over the conditions of their lives’ (Harding, 1991, p. 5) through consideration of ‘the ways in which unequal power structures are reproduced in leadership theorising, development and practice’ (Liu, 2018, p. 359).

The second part of the paper builds on research that draws attention to the importance of media images and narratives in representing women leaders and developing insights into leadership (Adamson, 2017; Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Elliott and Stead, 2018; Elliott et al., 2016; Kelan, 2013). Focusing on three influential women leaders—former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, former Australian of the year, Greta Tame, and environmental activist, Greta Thunberg—our analysis plots the leadership trajectories narrated by the media and how they re-emplotted their narratives through embodied performances of refusal. Consistent with feminist theorizing, we have highlighted aspects of their leadership, such as the importance of physical embodiment and corporeality in achieving agency and power, that are often overlooked in leadership theorization (Sinclair, 2005). By introducing a leadership of

refusal we have generated insight into possibilities for more agentic, less sacrificial ways of exercising leadership. We therefore urge leadership researchers to position refusal centrally, because first saying no in order to take risks towards achieving transformative action is, we suggest, a defining feature of leadership.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Alexia Panayiotou, Jackie Ford, Bill Harley, Scott Taylor and Nicole Ferry for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. We would also like to thank the organizers and participants of the sub-theme on Vulnerability and Embodied Experience in Organizations at the European Group for Organizational Studies Colloquium 2022, the Leadership and Leadership Development Special Interest Group of the British Academy of Management, and the Creating Leadership Capacity Conference at Henley Business School 2023 for opportunities to present this work and gain feedback on it.

References

- Adams, S. M., A. Gupta and J. D. Leeth (2008). ‘Are female executives over-represented in precarious leadership positions?’, *British Journal of Management*, **20**, pp. 1–12.
- Adamson, M. (2017). ‘Postfeminism, neoliberalism and a “successfully” balanced femininity in celebrity CEO autobiographies’, *Gender, Work and Organization*, **24**, pp. 314–327.
- Adamson, M. and E. Kelan (2019). ‘“Female heroes”: Celebrity executives as postfeminist role models’, *British Journal of Management*, **30**, pp. 981–996.
- Altheide, D. L. (1996). *Qualitative Media Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Alvesson, M. and A. Spicer (2011). *Metaphors We Lead By: Understanding Leadership in the Real World*. London: Routledge.
- Ashcraft, K. and S. L. Muhr (2018). ‘Coding military command as a promiscuous practice? Unsettling the gender binaries of leadership metaphors’, *Human Relations*, **71**, pp. 206–228.
- Ashcraft, K. L. (2013). ‘The glass slipper: “Incorporating” occupational identity in management studies’, *Academy of Management Review*, **38**, pp. 6–31.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text: Essays*. Trans. S. Heath. London: Fontana.
- Bell, E. and A. Sinclair (2016a). ‘Bodies, sexualities and women leaders in popular culture: From spectacle to metapicture’, *Gender in Management*, **31**, pp. 322–338.
- Bell, E. and A. Sinclair (2016b). ‘Re-envisaging leadership through the feminine imaginary in film and television’. In T. Beyes, M. Parker and C. Steyaert (eds), *Routledge Companion to Reinventing Management Education*, pp. 273–286. London: Routledge.
- Berdahl, J. L., M. Cooper, P. Glick, R. W. Livingston and J. C. Williams (2024). ‘Workplace masculinity contests and culture’. In J. Hearn, K. Aavik, D. L. Collinson and A. Thym (eds), *Routledge Handbook on Men, Masculinities and Organizations*, pp. 138–149. London: Routledge.
- Braidotti, R. (2020). ‘“We” are in this together, but we are not one and the same’, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, **17**, pp. 465–469.
- Bruckmüller, S., M. K. Ryan and F. Rink (2014). ‘Beyond the glass ceiling: the glass cliff and its lessons for organizational policy’, *Social Issues and Policy Review*, **8**, pp. 202–232.

- Cavarero, A. (2016). *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cixous, H. (1991). *Coming to Writing and Other Essays: Hélène Cixous*. Edited by D. Jenson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cixous, H. (1992). 'Grace and innocence'. In *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*. Edited, translated and introduced by A. Conley. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Collinson, D. (2011). 'Critical leadership studies'. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson and M. Uhl-Bien (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership*, pp. 181–194. London: Sage.
- Collinson, D. (2014). 'Dichotomies, dialectics and dilemmas: New directions for Critical Leadership Studies?', *Leadership*, **10**, pp. 36–55.
- Cook, A. and C. Glass (2014). 'Above the glass ceiling: When are women and racial/ethnic minorities promoted to CEO?', *Strategic Management Journal*, **35**, pp. 1080–1089.
- Cornelissen, J. P., M. Kafouris and A. R. Lock (2005). 'Metaphorical images of organization: how organizational researchers develop and select organizational metaphors', *Human Relations*, **58**, pp. 1545–1578.
- Courpasson, D. (2016). 'Impactful resistance: the persistence of recognition politics in the workplace', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, **25**, pp. 96–100.
- Davison, J. (2010). '[In]visible [in]tangibles: Visual portraits of the business elite', *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, **35**, pp. 165–183.
- Eagly, A. (2011). 'Female leadership advantage and disadvantage: resolving the contradiction'. In D., Collinson, K., Grint, and B. Jackson (eds), *Leadership*, pp. 251–272. London, Sage.
- Eagly, A. H. and S. Riger (2014). 'Feminism and psychology: Critique of methods and epistemology', *American Psychologist*, **69**, pp. 685–702.
- Eagly, A., and L., Carli (2016). 'Women face a labyrinth: An examination of metaphors of women leaders', *Gender in Management*, **31**, pp. 514–527.
- Elliott, C. and V. Stead (2018). 'Constructing women's leadership representation in the UK press during a time of financial crisis', *Organization Studies*, **39**, pp. 19–45.
- Elliott, C., V. Stead, S. Mavin and J. Williams (Eds) (2016). *Gender, Media and Organization: Challenging Mis(s) Representations of Women Leaders and Managers*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Elsaid, E. and N. D. Ursel (2018). 'Re-examining the glass cliff hypothesis using survival analysis: the case of female CEO tenure', *British Journal of Management*, **29**, pp. 156–170.
- Fotaki, M. and N. Harding (2018). *Gender and the Organization: Women at Work in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.
- Fournier, V. and C. Grey (2000). 'At the critical moment: conditions and prospects for critical management studies', *Human Relations*, **53**, pp. 7–32.
- Gagnon, S. and D. Collinson (2017). 'Resistance through difference: The co-constitution of dissent and inclusion', *Organization Studies*, **38**, pp. 1253–1276.
- Gillard, J. (2022). *Not Now, Not Ever: Ten Years on from the Misogyny Speech*. London: Penguin.
- Glass, C. and A. Cook (2016). 'Leading at the top: understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling', *Leadership Quarterly*, **27**, pp. 51–63.
- Glass, C. and A. Cook (2020). 'Pathways to the glass cliff: a risk tax for women and minority leaders?', *Social Problems*, **67**, pp. 637–653.
- Grint, K. (2020). 'The sacred in leadership: separation, sacrifice and silence', *Human Relations*, **31**, pp. 89–107.
- Gupta, V. K., S. C. Mortal, S. Silveri, M. Sun and D. B. Turban (2018). 'You're fired: Gender disparities in CEO dismissal', *Journal of Management*, **46**, pp. 560–582.
- Guthey, E. and B. Jackson (2005). 'CEO portraits and the authenticity paradox', *Journal of Management Studies*, **42**, pp. 1057–1082.
- Harding, N., J. Ford and H. Lee (2017). 'Towards a performative theory of resistance: senior managers and revolting subject(ivities)', *Organization Studies*, **38**, pp. 1209–1231.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Haslam, A. and M. Ryan (2008). 'The road to the glass cliff: differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations', *Leadership Quarterly*, **19**, pp. 530–546.
- Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Heilman, M., A. Wallen, D. Fuchs and M. Tamkins (2004). 'Penalties for success: Reactions to women who succeed at male gender-type tasks', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **89**, pp. 416–427.
- Hernes, T. (2022). *Organization and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Honig, B. (2021). *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ibarra, H., R. Ely and D. Kolb (2013). 'Women rising: The unseen barriers', *Harvard Business Review*, **September**, pp. 61–66.
- Ingersoll, A., A. Cook and C. Glass (2023). 'A free solo in heels: corporate risk taking among women executives'. *Journal of Business Research*, **157**, pp. 1–9.
- Kelan, E. (2013). 'The becoming of business bodies: gender, appearance and leadership development', *Management Learning*, **44**, pp. 45–61.
- Klein, J. and J. M. Amis (2021). 'The dynamics of framing: image, emotion, and the European migration crisis', *Academy of Management Review*, **64**, pp. 1324–1354.
- Kress, G. and T. van Leeuwen (1996). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Ladkin, D. and C. Bridges Patrick (2022). 'Whiteness in leadership theorizing: A critical analysis of race in Bass's transformational leadership theory', *Leadership*, **18**, pp. 205–223.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Liu, H. (2018). 'Reimagining ethical leadership as a relational, contextual and political practice', *Leadership*, **13**, pp. 343–367.
- Lupton, D. (2013). *Risk*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Mangham, I. (1990). 'Managing as a performing art', *British Journal of Management*, **1**, pp. 105–115.
- Mantere, S. and M. Ketokivi (2013). 'Reasoning in organizational science', *Academy of Management Review*, **38**, pp. 70–89.
- McGranahan, C. (2016). 'Theorizing refusal: an introduction', *Cultural Anthropology*, **31**, pp. 319–325.
- Meindl, J. R., S. B. Ehrlich and J. M. Dukerich (1985). 'The romance of leadership', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **30**, pp. 78–102.
- Miller, S. (2011). 'All about Eve: Seventeenth-century women writers and the narrative of the Fall'. In M. Suzuki (ed.), *The History of British Women's Writing, 1610–1690*, pp. 64–79. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Orgad, S. and R. Gill (2022). *Confidence Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ortner, S. B. (1995). 'Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal', *Comparative Study of Society and History*, **37**, pp. 173–193.
- Prasad, P. and A. Prasad (2000). 'Stretching the iron cage: the constitution and implications of routine workplace resistance', *Organization Science*, **11**, pp. 387–403.
- Pullen, A. and S. Vachhani (2021). 'Feminist ethics and women leaders: From difference to intercorporeality', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **173**, pp. 233–243.
- Rooke, D. W. (2007). 'Feminist criticism of the Old Testament: Why bother?' *Feminist Theology*, **15**, pp. 160–174.
- Ryalls, E. D. and S. R. Mazzarella (2021). "'Famous, beloved, reviled, respected, feared, celebrated.'" Media construction of Greta Thunberg', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, **14**, pp. 438–453.

- Ryan, M. K. and S. A. Haslam (2005). 'The glass cliff: evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions', *British Journal of Management*, **16**, pp. 81–90.
- Ryan, M. K. and S. A. Haslam (2007). 'The glass cliff: exploring the dynamics surrounding the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions', *Academy of Management Review*, **32**, pp. 549–572.
- Ryan, M. K. and S. A. Haslam (2009). 'Glass cliffs are not so easily scaled: on the precariousness of female CEOs positions', *British Journal of Management*, **20**, pp. 13–16.
- Ryan, M. K., S. A. Haslam, T. Morgenroth, F. Rink, J. Stoker and K. Peters (2016). 'Getting on top of the glass cliff: reviewing a decade of evidence, explanations, and impact', *Leadership Quarterly*, **27**, pp. 446–455.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sellers, S. (1991). *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Simpson, A. (2007). 'On ethnographic refusal: indigeneity, "voice" and colonial citizenship', *Junctures*, **9**, pp. 67–80.
- Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Simpson, A. (2016). 'Consent's revenge', *Cultural Anthropology*, **31**, pp. 326–333.
- Simpson, R. and P. Lewis (eds) (2010). *Revealing and Concealing Gender: Issues of Visibility in Organizations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sinclair, A. (1998). *Doing Leadership Differently: Gender, Power and Sexuality in a Changing Business Culture*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Sinclair, A. (2005). 'Body possibilities in leadership', *Leadership*, **1**, pp. 387–406.
- Sinclair, A. (2009). 'Seducing leadership', *Gender, Work and Organization*, **16**, pp. 266–284.
- Sinclair, A. (2014). 'Afeminist case for leadership'. In J. Damousi, K. Rubenstein and M. Tomsic (eds), *Diversity in Leadership: Australian Women, Past and Present*, pp. 17–35. Australian National University E-press.
- Sinclair, A. and D. Ladkin (2020). 'Leading with embodied care'. In L. Tompkins (ed.), *Paradox and Power in Caring Leadership: Critical and Philosophical Reflections*, pp. 63–73. Abingdon: Edward Elgar.
- Sinha, P. N. (2010). 'The dramatic genre in leadership studies: implications for research and practice', *Leadership*, **6**, pp. 185–205.
- Sinha, P., O. Smolović Jones and B. Carroll (2021). 'Theorizing dramaturgical resistance leadership from the leadership campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn', *Human Relations*, **74**, pp. 354–382.
- Spoelstra, S., N. Butler and H. Delaney (2021). 'Measures of faith: science and belief in leadership studies', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, **30**, pp. 300–311.
- Vachhani, S. J. (2009). 'Vagina dentata and the demonological body: Explorations of the feminine demon in organisation'. In A. Pullen and C. Rhodes (eds), *Advances in Organization Studies – Bits of Organisation* pp. 163–183. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Vachhani, S. J. (2018). 'Rethinking the politics of writing differently through *écriture féminine*', *Management Learning*, **50**, pp. 11–23.
- Walby, S. (2011). *The Future of Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Yaghi, A. (2018). 'Glass cliff or glass prison: Think evil – think men in organizational leadership', *International Journal of Public Administration*, **41**, pp. 998–1008.
- Zerubavel, E. (2003). *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zoller, H. and G. Fairhurst (2007). 'Resistance leadership', *Human Relations*, **60**, pp. 1331–1360.
- Zulianello, M. and D. Ceccobelli (2020). 'Don't call it climate populism: on Greta Thunberg's technocratic ecocentrism', *The Political Quarterly*, **91**, pp. 623–631.

Emma Bell is Professor of Organisation and Leadership at The Open University, UK and International Visiting Professor at Mälardalen University. Her research explores questions related to materiality, embodiment and meaning in organizations using qualitative methods of inquiry.

Amanda Sinclair is an author, researcher and teacher in leadership, gender and diversity, with a special interest in applying mindfulness in leadership. Currently a Professorial Fellow at Melbourne Business School, Amanda was appointed its Foundation Chair of Management (Diversity and Change).

Sheena Vachhani is Professor of Work and Organisation Studies and co-director of the Centre for Action Research and Critical Inquiry in Organisations (ARCIO) at the University of Bristol, UK. Her research explores ethics, politics, and difference in work and organization with a view to understanding social transformation and social justice. She also has a longstanding interest in using critical perspectives to teach and research leadership.