



Crowdfunding for women entrepreneurship: Opportunities, challenges, and the path forward

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Abstract

Crowdfunding has emerged as a potentially transformative financing mechanism for women entrepreneurs, offering an alternative to traditional funding sources that have historically excluded or disadvantaged female-led ventures. This comprehensive review synthesizes current research on crowdfunding's role in women's entrepreneurship, examining opportunities, persistent barriers, and emerging strategies for success. Drawing from a systematic analysis of recent literature spanning reward-based, equity, and lending platforms, covering the 2012–2023 period, this article reveals a complex landscape where crowdfunding both democratizes access to capital and reproduces existing gender biases. While women demonstrate notable success on reward-based platforms like Kickstarter, equity crowdfunding presents mixed outcomes that vary significantly by context, platform design, and investor composition. Key findings indicate that success factors for women entrepreneurs include strategic signal management, leveraging third-party endorsements, building diverse networks, and understanding platform-specific dynamics. The analysis identifies critical research gaps and proposes future directions for both scholarship and platform design to better serve women entrepreneurs in the evolving crowdfunding ecosystem.

Keywords: Crowdfunding; Financing; Gender Bias; Startup Funding; Women Entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

The entrepreneurial landscape has long been characterized by significant gender disparities in access to capital, with women entrepreneurs facing persistent challenges in securing traditional venture capital and bank financing (Saluja, 2024). These barriers have contributed to a substantial funding gap, with female-founded startups receiving only a fraction of total venture capital investment globally. In this context, crowdfunding has emerged as a potentially democratizing force, offering alternative pathways to capital that bypass traditional gatekeepers and enable direct connections between entrepreneurs and funders.

Crowdfunding platforms have proliferated rapidly since the early 2010s, encompassing diverse models including reward-based crowdfunding (e.g., Kickstarter, Indiegogo), equity crowdfunding, and peer-to-peer lending platforms. Each model presents unique opportunities and challenges for women entrepreneurs, creating a complex ecosystem that requires careful analysis to understand its true impact on gender equality in entrepreneurial finance.

This article provides a comprehensive examination of crowdfunding's role in women's entrepreneurship, synthesizing empirical evidence from recent research to address three critical questions:

1. What is the current state of women's participation and success in crowdfunding across different platform types?
2. What barriers and biases persist in crowdfunding environments, and how do they manifest differently across platforms and contexts?

3. What strategies and success factors have emerged to help women entrepreneurs navigate and succeed in crowdfunding campaigns?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

Research on crowdfunding and gender draws from multiple theoretical frameworks that help explain observed patterns and outcomes. Signaling theory provides a crucial lens for understanding how women entrepreneurs communicate venture quality to potential funders, particularly given evidence that quality signals are interpreted differently based on founder gender (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021). Gender role congruity theory explains how stereotypical expectations about women's roles and capabilities influence investor perceptions and funding decisions.

Stereotype content theory and warm-glow theory illuminate investor motivations, particularly in prosocial crowdfunding contexts where women entrepreneurs may be perceived as more trustworthy or socially oriented (Zhao et al., 2021; Figueroa-Armijos & Berns, 2021). Assortative matching theory helps explain supply-side fundraising choices and gender gaps, as investors often prefer to fund entrepreneurs who share similar characteristics (Hellmann et al., 2021; Hellmann et al., 2025).

Additional frameworks include Expectancy Violations Theory, which explains when women benefit from innovation claims by violating traditional gender expectations (Seigner et al., 2022), and social identity theory, which addresses how behavioral signals affect investor perceptions differently for male and female entrepreneurs (Giordano, 2023).

2.2. Evolution of Crowdfunding Research

The academic literature on crowdfunding and gender has evolved significantly since 2012, with systematic reviews identifying 36 empirical studies conducted between 2012 and 2023 (Saluja, 2024). This research spans multiple platform types, geographical contexts, and methodological approaches, creating a rich but sometimes contradictory body of evidence.

Early studies focused primarily on documenting gender differences in participation rates and success outcomes. More recent research has adopted sophisticated theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to understand the mechanisms underlying these differences, including experimental designs, natural experiments, and large-scale platform data analysis.

Table 1: Mapping of Key Empirical Studies on Gender and Crowdfunding (2012–2023).

Author(s)	Platform Type	Geographic Context	Methodology	Key Gender-Related Findings
Gafni et al. (2020)	Reward-based (Kickstarter)	USA	Large-scale platform data + surveys	Women exhibit higher success rates but face taste-based discrimination from some male backers
Battaglia et al. (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	Europe (Poland)	Regression analysis	Female-led ventures more likely to receive funding in certain European contexts
Zhao et al. (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	Europe & Latin America	Panel data analysis	Female entrepreneurs benefit from lead investors and early-stage campaigns
Andrieu et al. (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	France	Platform-level empirical study	Persistent gender disadvantage in later-stage and capital-intensive ventures
Kleinert & Mochkabadi (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	Germany	Experimental + observational data	Quality signals interpreted differently based on founder gender
Hellmann et al. (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	UK & Europe	Econometric analysis	Evidence of assortative matching between investor and entrepreneur gender
Prokop & Wang (2021)	Equity crowdfunding	Multi-country	Meta-analytical review	Gender gaps vary by venture maturity and funding size
Kromidha et al. (2020)	Crowdlending / Development platforms	India	Qualitative network analysis	Women face network constraints but benefit from intermediary support
Johnson & Smith (2022)	Crowdlending	USA	Experimental design	Online lending platforms reduce traditional gender bias
Seigner et al. (2022)	Reward-based crowdfunding	USA	Field experiments	Innovation claims benefit women through expectancy violations
Fellnhöfer & Deng (2023)	Reward-based crowdfunding	Europe	Behavioral experiments	Intuitive investor decision-making promotes gender equality

3. Current State and Trends in Women's Crowdfunding Participation

3.1. Platform-Specific Participation Patterns

The evidence reveals significant variation in women's participation and success across different crowdfunding platform types. On reward-based platforms like Kickstarter, women comprise approximately 34.7% of entrepreneurs and often demonstrate higher success rates than their male counterparts (Gafni et al., 2020). This suggests that reward-based crowdfunding may indeed provide a more level playing field for women entrepreneurs.

Equity crowdfunding presents a more complex picture, with outcomes varying significantly by geographical context and platform characteristics. Some European studies report female advantages, with female-founded firms more likely to receive funding (Battaglia et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). However, other research documents persistent disadvantages, particularly in later-stage or capital-intensive ventures (Andrieu et al., 2021; Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021).

Crowdlending and microloan platforms show promise for reducing traditional bias, particularly when intermediaries and field partners are aligned with supporting women entrepreneurs (Kromidha et al., 2020; Johnson & Smith, 2022). These platforms can democratize access in some settings, though outcomes depend heavily on local organizational context and network effects.

3.2. Temporal and Contextual Variations

Research indicates that women's crowdfunding outcomes are highly sensitive to context and venture stage. Advantages often observed in early-stage campaigns may diminish for "seasoned" offerings or capital-intensive ventures (Hellmann et al., 2021; Prokop & Wang, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). This pattern suggests that while crowdfunding may lower initial barriers for women, scaling challenges persist as ventures mature.

Geographic variations are also significant, with different patterns emerging across countries and regions. For example, Latin American data shows that the presence of at least one woman on a firm's board increased average pledges and percentage of funding targets achieved (Zhao et al., 2021). These regional differences highlight the importance of local context in shaping crowdfunding outcomes.

4. Barriers and Challenges Facing Women Entrepreneurs

4.1. Network and Social Capital Limitations

One of the most consistently identified barriers facing women entrepreneurs in crowdfunding is limited access to networks and social capital (Saluja, 2024; Kromidha et al., 2020). Successful crowdfunding campaigns often depend on initial momentum generated through personal and professional networks, and women entrepreneurs frequently face disadvantages in this area due to historically limited access to business networks and venture capital communities.

The network effect is particularly pronounced in equity crowdfunding, where early investors and lead investors play crucial signaling roles. Research shows that the presence of lead investors can amplify female advantages in some equity markets, though this advantage may weaken for later-stage ventures (Zhao et al., 2021).

4.2. Funding Targets and The funding Target Disparity

Female entrepreneurs often set lower fundraising goals compared to their male counterparts, which partly explains smaller amounts raised even when success probabilities are similar (Hellmann et al., 2021). This pattern may reflect both strategic goal setting under structural constraints, including differential access to resources, risk exposure and investor expectations, rather than inherent differences in entrepreneurial ambitions.

The funding target disparity has important implications for venture scaling and long-term success. While conservative funding targets may improve campaign success rates, they may also limit the resources available for rapid growth and market expansion.

4.3. Platform Design and Representation Issues

Women entrepreneurs face challenges related to platform design and representation that can limit their success. On reward-based platforms, women are often concentrated in stereotyped categories, which can limit addressable investor demand and scale (Gafni et al., 2020; Kromidha et al., 2020). This sectoral concentration reflects broader patterns of occupational segregation and may constrain the types of ventures women feel comfortable launching through crowdfunding.

Additionally, digital divide issues may disproportionately affect women entrepreneurs, particularly in developing markets where access to technology and digital marketing skills may be more limited (Kromidha et al., 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that the majority of studies reviewed in this section conceptualize gender as a binary variable and do not incorporate intersectional dimensions such as caste, race, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic background. As a result, the identified barriers related to networks, social capital, and platform access may not be uniformly experienced by all women entrepreneurs. These limitations suggest that the

challenges discussed here may underrepresent the compounded disadvantages faced by women located at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, particularly in developing and socially stratified contexts.

These structural barriers are further compounded by discriminatory investor perceptions and evaluative biases, which are discussed in detail in the following section.

5. Gender Bias and Discrimination Patterns

While the literature consistently documents gender-based bias and discrimination in crowdfunding, it is important to note that most empirical studies rely on binary gender classifications and lack intersectional data. Consequently, the observed patterns of statistical and taste-based discrimination primarily reflect aggregate gender effects and may not fully capture how bias operates for women entrepreneurs who also differ by race, caste, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status. This limitation constrains the generalizability of current findings and suggests that existing evidence may underestimate the intensity and forms of discrimination experienced by women situated at multiple intersecting disadvantage positions.

5.1. Types of Bias in Crowdfunding

Research has documented both statistical and taste-based forms of gender bias in crowdfunding, though the direction and magnitude depend on platform type, investor mix, and signal characteristics (Saluja, 2024, Gafni et al., 2020). Taste-based discrimination is evident in survey data from Kickstarter backers, with some male backers displaying explicit discrimination against female entrepreneurs (Gafni et al., 2020).

Statistical discrimination manifests in the differential interpretation of quality signals based on founder gender. Management experience, for example, helps men but can hurt women, while third-party media coverage is more beneficial for women in equity settings (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021). These patterns suggest that investors apply different evaluative frameworks to male and female entrepreneurs.

5.2. Investor Gender and Assortative Matching

Investor gender plays a crucial role in funding outcomes, with evidence of assortative matching where investors prefer same-gender entrepreneurs (Hellmann et al., 2021, 2025). Female investors disproportionately support mixed-gender teams, while male investors fund all-female teams relatively less. This pattern has important implications for platform design and investor recruitment strategies.

The composition of the investor base thus becomes a critical factor in determining women's success in crowdfunding. Platforms with more gender-balanced investor populations are likely to provide more equitable outcomes for women entrepreneurs.

Future research incorporating intersectional investor–entrepreneur matching could further illuminate how assortative preferences vary across multiple identity dimensions rather than gender alone.

5.3. Signal Interpretation and Stereotyping

The interpretation of entrepreneurial signals varies systematically by founder gender, creating complex challenges for women entrepreneurs. Quality signals that benefit male entrepreneurs may be neutral or even harmful for women, while other signals may be more powerful for women (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021).

For example, innovation claims can benefit women entrepreneurs, especially in male-stereotyped categories, by violating traditional gender expectations in positive ways (Seigner et al., 2022). However, signals of proactiveness may be penalized by backers when displayed by women entrepreneurs, while autonomy and risk-taking signals tend to help women on reward platforms (Giordano, 2023).

6. Success Factors and Strategic Recommendations

6.1. Signal Management Strategies

Successful women entrepreneurs have developed sophisticated signal management strategies to navigate gender bias in crowdfunding. Third-party endorsements and media coverage are particularly powerful signals for

female founders, especially in equity crowdfunding contexts (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021). These external validations can offset negative interpretations of experience and expertise signals.

Innovation framing represents another effective strategy, particularly on reward-based platforms. Women who claim innovation or violate gender expectations can improve outcomes, especially in male-stereotyped categories (Seigner et al., 2022). This suggests that strategic positioning and messaging can help women entrepreneurs overcome stereotypical limitations.

6.2. Network Building and Investor Engagement

Given the importance of networks in crowdfunding success, women entrepreneurs must develop targeted strategies for network building and investor engagement. This includes cultivating relationships with lead investors who can provide crucial signaling effects in equity crowdfunding (Zhao et al., 2021).

Leveraging female investors and creating gender-balanced investor networks can also improve outcomes, given evidence of assortative matching preferences (Hellmann et al., 2021, 2025). Platforms and entrepreneurs should consider strategies to attract and engage female investors specifically.

6.3. Platform Selection and Campaign Design

Understanding platform-specific dynamics is crucial for women entrepreneurs' success. Reward-based platforms may offer more favorable environments for women entrepreneurs, particularly in consumer-oriented categories (Gafni et al., 2020). Equity platforms require more sophisticated signal management and network building strategies.

Campaign framing and messaging should be carefully considered, with attention to how different signals will be interpreted by predominantly male investor audiences. Emphasizing concrete achievements, third-party validations, and innovation can help overcome stereotypical limitations.

6.4. Psychological and Behavioral Factors

Recent experimental research suggests that fast, intuitive decision modes among investors can promote gender equality in reward crowdfunding contexts (Fellnhöfer & Deng, 2023). This implies that campaign cues triggering positive intuitive responses may particularly help women entrepreneurs.

Understanding backer psychology and designing campaigns that appeal to both rational and emotional decision-making processes can improve outcomes for women entrepreneurs across different platform types.

7. Platform Differences and Their Impact on Women Entrepreneurs

7.1. Reward-Based Crowdfunding Platforms

Reward-based platforms like Kickstarter appear to provide the most favorable environment for women entrepreneurs. Women comprise approximately 34.7% of entrepreneurs on these platforms and often achieve higher success rates than men (Gafni et al., 2020). This success may be attributed to several factors:

- **Consumer-oriented focus:** Many reward-based campaigns focus on consumer products and services, areas where women entrepreneurs are well-represented and may have strong market insights.
- **Community engagement:** These platforms emphasize community building and engagement, skills that align with traditional gender role expectations and may favor women entrepreneurs.
- **Lower capital requirements:** Reward-based campaigns often require smaller funding amounts, making them more accessible to women entrepreneurs who may face network and resource constraints.

However, women on reward-based platforms still face challenges related to sectoral concentration and may be limited to stereotypically "female" categories, potentially constraining growth and scalability.

7.2. Equity Crowdfunding Platforms

Equity crowdfunding presents a more complex landscape for women entrepreneurs, with outcomes varying significantly by context and platform design. Key factors influencing success include:

- **Investor composition:** The gender balance of the investor base significantly affects outcomes for women entrepreneurs (Hellmann et al., 2021, 2025)
- **Lead investor presence:** Lead investors can amplify advantages for female entrepreneurs, though this effect may diminish for later-stage ventures (Zhao et al., 2021).
- **Signal interpretation:** Quality signals are interpreted differently based on founder gender, requiring sophisticated signal management strategies (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021).

European equity crowdfunding markets have shown more favorable outcomes for women entrepreneurs in some studies (Battaglia et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021), suggesting that regulatory environment and cultural context play important roles.

7.3. Peer-to-Peer Lending and Microfinance Platforms

Crowdlending and microfinance platforms offer unique opportunities for women entrepreneurs, particularly in developing markets. These platforms can reduce traditional bias when intermediaries and field partners are aligned with supporting women (Kromidha et al., 2020; Johnson & Smith, 2022) Success factors include:

- **Intermediary networks:** Local organizations and field partners can play crucial roles in supporting women entrepreneurs and overcoming traditional barriers.
- **Prosocial framing:** Platforms that emphasize social impact and community development may be particularly supportive of women entrepreneurs.
- **Lower barriers to entry:** These platforms often have lower barriers to entry and may be more accessible to women entrepreneurs with limited business experience or networks.

8. Regional and Cultural Variations

8.1. Geographic Differences in Outcomes

Research reveals significant geographic variations in women's crowdfunding success, highlighting the importance of local context, regulatory environment, and cultural factors. European markets have generally shown more favorable outcomes for women entrepreneurs in equity crowdfunding (Battaglia et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021), while other regions display different patterns.

In Latin America, the presence of women on company boards positively correlates with crowdfunding success, suggesting that gender diversity signals may be particularly valued in these markets (Zhao et al., 2021). These regional differences underscore the need for context-specific strategies and platform designs.

8.2. Cultural and Regulatory Factors

Cultural attitudes toward women's entrepreneurship and gender roles significantly influence crowdfunding outcomes. Regulatory environments also play a role, with different securities regulations and investor protection frameworks affecting platform operations and investor behavior.

The development of local crowdfunding ecosystems, including the presence of supporting organizations and networks, can significantly impact women entrepreneurs' success. Regions with strong support networks and favorable regulatory environments tend to produce better outcomes for women entrepreneurs.

9. Future Research Directions and Recommendations

9.1. Research Gaps and Opportunities

The systematic review of literature identifies several critical research gaps that require attention:

Intersectional approaches: Future research should adopt more intersectional and context-sensitive approaches, examining how gender intersects with other identity categories such as race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status.

Longitudinal studies: More longitudinal analyses of post-campaign outcomes are needed to understand the long-term impact of crowdfunding on women entrepreneurs' ventures and careers.

Experimental research: Controlled experiments testing platform design features (e.g., blind review processes, anonymized pitches) could provide valuable insights into causal mechanisms underlying gender bias.

Cross-platform comparisons: Comparative studies across different platform types and geographic contexts would help isolate specific mechanisms and identify best practices.

9.2. Methodological Recommendations

Future research should employ more sophisticated methodological approaches:

- **Large-scale data analysis** measuring investor composition and gendered behavior patterns.
- **Natural experiments** leveraging platform design changes or regulatory shifts.
- **Field experiments** testing specific interventions to reduce bias.
- **Mixed-methods approaches** combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights from entrepreneurs and investors.

9.3. Platform Design Recommendations

Based on current research findings, several platform design improvements could better serve women entrepreneurs:

Bias reduction mechanisms:

- Implement blind or delayed disclosure of founder gender in initial screening processes.
- Highlight neutral third-party endorsements and achievements.
- Encourage lead investor participation and visibility.
- Promote gender-balanced advisory boards and investor networks.

Network building support:

- Provide mentorship and network building programs specifically for women entrepreneurs.
- Create female entrepreneur and investor communities within platforms.
- Offer training and resources on signal management and campaign optimization.

Algorithmic fairness:

- Audit recommendation algorithms for gender bias.
- Ensure diverse representation in featured campaigns and platform marketing.
- Monitor and report on gender-based outcome disparities.

9.4. Policy Implications

The research findings have important policy implications for governments and regulatory bodies:

Regulatory frameworks: Develop crowdfunding regulations that consider gender equity implications and require platforms to report on diversity metrics.

Support programs: Create targeted support programs for women entrepreneurs engaging in crowdfunding, including training, mentorship, and network building initiatives.

Research funding: Support academic research on gender and crowdfunding to build the evidence base for effective interventions.

10. Implications for Practice

10.1. Recommendations for Women Entrepreneurs

Based on the research synthesis, several practical recommendations emerge for women entrepreneurs considering crowdfunding:

Platform selection strategy:

- Consider reward-based platforms for consumer-oriented ventures.
- Research investor composition and platform culture before selecting equity crowdfunding platforms.
- Evaluate the presence of support networks and mentorship programs.

Campaign design and messaging:

- Develop sophisticated signal management strategies.
- Seek third-party endorsements and media coverage.
- Frame innovations and achievements clearly and confidently.
- Consider how different signals will be interpreted by predominantly male investor audiences.

Network building:

- Invest in building diverse professional networks before launching campaigns.
- Engage with female investor networks and communities.
- Seek out lead investors and advisors who can provide credibility signals.

10.2. Recommendations for Platforms

Crowdfunding platforms can take several steps to better serve women entrepreneurs:

Design improvements:

- Implement bias reduction mechanisms in platform algorithms and processes.
- Create supportive communities and resources for women entrepreneurs.
- Provide training and mentorship programs.
- Monitor and report on gender-based outcome disparities.

Investor education:

- Educate investors about unconscious bias and its impact on funding decisions.
- Promote awareness of successful women entrepreneurs and their achievements.
- Encourage diverse investor participation.

10.3. Recommendations for Investors

Individual and institutional investors can contribute to more equitable crowdfunding outcomes:

Bias awareness: Recognize and actively counter unconscious bias in investment decision-making processes.

Due diligence: Focus on objective venture metrics and potential rather than stereotypical assumptions about founder capabilities.

Portfolio diversity: Actively seek opportunities to invest in women-led ventures and support gender-balanced portfolios.

11. Limitations and Considerations

This analysis is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings:

Publication bias: The academic literature may overrepresent studies finding significant gender effects, potentially skewing the apparent magnitude of bias and discrimination.



Platform evolution: Crowdfunding platforms continue to evolve rapidly, and findings from earlier studies may not reflect current platform dynamics.

Sample selection: Many studies focus on specific platforms, geographic regions, or time periods, limiting generalizability.

Measurement challenges: Defining and measuring success in crowdfunding involves multiple metrics (funding amounts, success rates, post-campaign outcomes) that may not capture the full impact on women entrepreneurs.

Causality: Much of the research is observational, making it difficult to establish causal relationships between gender and crowdfunding outcomes.

12. Conclusion

Crowdfunding represents both an opportunity and a challenge for women entrepreneurs seeking access to capital. While these platforms have democratized certain aspects of entrepreneurial finance and provided new pathways to funding, they have not eliminated gender bias and discrimination. Instead, they have created new contexts in which existing biases manifest in complex ways.

The evidence reveals significant variation across platform types, with reward-based crowdfunding appearing most favorable for women entrepreneurs, while equity crowdfunding presents mixed outcomes that depend heavily on context, investor composition, and signal management strategies. Success in crowdfunding requires sophisticated understanding of platform dynamics, investor psychology, and strategic communication.

Key success factors for women entrepreneurs include strategic signal management, building diverse networks, leveraging third-party endorsements, and understanding platform-specific dynamics. However, individual strategies alone are insufficient to address systemic biases. Platform design improvements, investor education, and supportive regulatory frameworks are needed to create more equitable crowdfunding ecosystems. The absence of intersectional evidence in current research suggests that the true magnitude of disadvantage faced by many women entrepreneurs in crowdfunding ecosystems remains underestimated.

Future research should focus on intersectional approaches, longitudinal outcomes, and experimental tests of bias reduction mechanisms. The goal should be to develop evidence-based strategies for creating crowdfunding environments that truly democratize access to capital for all entrepreneurs, regardless of gender.

The crowdfunding revolution has created new possibilities for women entrepreneurs, but realizing this potential requires continued effort from researchers, platforms, investors, and policymakers. By understanding the complex dynamics of gender in crowdfunding and working to address persistent biases, we can move closer to the goal of truly equitable entrepreneurial finance.

As the crowdfunding ecosystem continues to evolve, ongoing research and adaptation will be essential to ensure that these platforms fulfill their promise of democratizing access to capital and supporting the diverse entrepreneurial talent that drives innovation and economic growth.

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