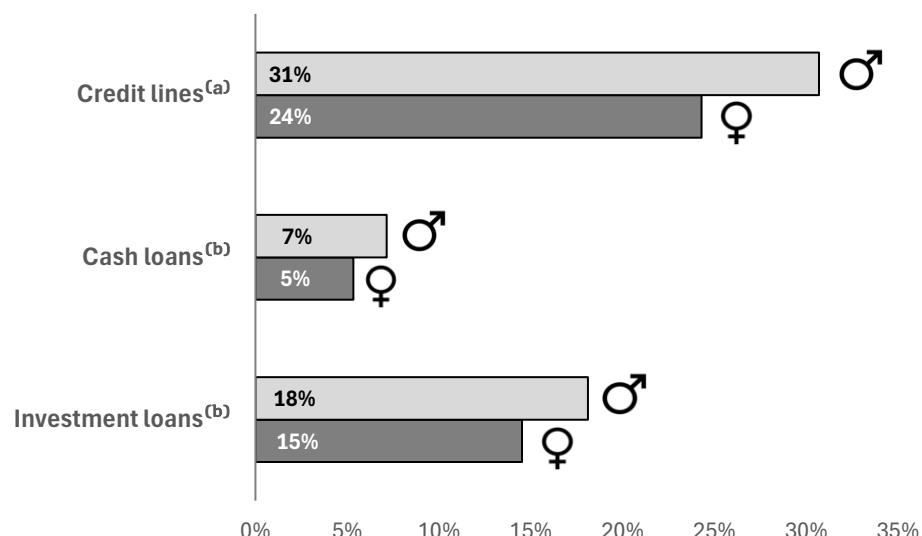


# Female business leaders: fewer credit applications, but not more rejections

By Nicoletta Berardi and Benjamin Bureau

*French female-led businesses make less use of bank credit than companies run by men, a difference attributable to a lower demand for credit among female executives. However, the probability of a loan application being rejected by a bank does not vary according to the business leader's gender.*

Chart 1. Bank credit applications: female vs. male business leaders



Key: On average, between 2012 and 2023, 24% of French female-led businesses (♀) applied for a line of credit over the previous few months, compared with 31% of companies run by men (♂).

Sources: Banque de France data (matching the Access to bank financing for companies survey and the FIBEN database).

Notes: These descriptive statistics do not control for the characteristics of businesses or business leaders. (a): applications over the past 12 months. (b): applications over the past 3 months.

## The position of women in the business world is improving slowly

Statisticians and economists are increasingly focusing on the issue of gender equality in the business world. Several findings have emerged from their research that are now widely accepted. In particular, the gender pay gap is well documented: although it has tended to narrow over the past few decades, it remains substantial, at around 22% in 2023 in the private

sector ([INSEE, 2025](#)). Women are also significantly under-represented in senior management positions (25% in 2023), and this situation is improving only slowly (see [Berardi and Bureau, 2025a](#)). However, female representation on boards of directors, supervisory boards and executive committees of large companies has increased significantly following the gender quotas introduced by the Copé-Zimmermann (2011) and Rixain (2021) Acts.

## **The issue of financing in particular raises questions**

However, the conclusions are less clearcut when it comes to the potential barriers encountered by women in executive positions, particularly with regard to access to financing. Nevertheless, two recent studies are instructive. The first focusing on French start-ups ([Hebert, 2025](#)) demonstrates that, among young businesses with high growth potential, female entrepreneurs are 22% less likely to obtain external equity financing.

This type of finding raises not only a question of fairness, but also a major question about economic efficiency. Unequal access to financing is likely to lead to an underutilisation of women's talents, reduced prospects for the survival and growth of efficient and innovative businesses, and, ultimately, to macroeconomic inefficiencies resulting from poor allocation of capital among firms.

Moreover, these issues do not just concern fundraising by French Tech businesses, but all financing channels, particularly bank lending. [Morazzoni and Sy \(2022\)](#), for example, estimate that eliminating the gender gap in access to credit in the United States would boost aggregate production by around 4%, thanks to higher female employment and less misallocation of capital.

In this context, a second study – by the authors of this blog post – analyses access to bank credit for French female-led businesses, covering all types of companies and not just start-ups ([Berardi and Bureau, 2025b](#)).

## **Female business leaders request less bank credit**

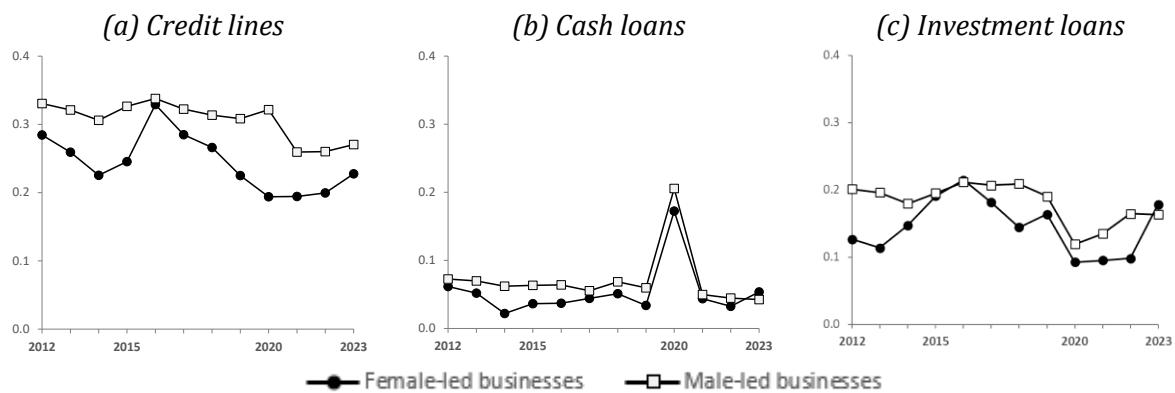
This study shows that, all other things being equal, female-led businesses operate with relatively less bank credit than companies run by men. The question then is whether this difference stems primarily from supply-side factors (i.e., credit institutions being more likely to reject applications from companies run by women), or demand-side factors (i.e. female business leaders requesting less bank credit).

Descriptive statistics show first and foremost, that female executives request credit less frequently than their male counterparts (see Chart 1). Our econometric analysis bears out this finding when controlling for the characteristics of businesses and of business leaders (see [Berardi and Bureau, 2025b](#)). All other things being equal, female-led businesses request

between 12% and 26% less credit, depending on the type of financial instrument considered (cash loans, investment loans, lines of credit). However, the probability of an application being rejected by a bank does not differ significantly between female and male-led businesses, once we control for the characteristics of the company (sector, credit risk, etc.) and the business leader (age, past bankruptcies, etc.). All in all, differences in the use of bank credit between women and men arise mainly from the fact that female business leaders apply for credit less frequently than men.

While the representation of women in companies has slowly improved over the past decade, the same cannot be said for the gender gap in terms of bank credit applications. Descriptive statistics show that this gap has not narrowed in any meaningful way over the 2012-23 period (see Chart 2). This finding is confirmed by our econometric analysis (see [Berardi and Bureau, 2025b](#)), which takes account of the fact that the characteristics of female-led businesses differ significantly from companies run by men (size, sector, etc.).

**Chart 2. Trends in demand for bank credit**



Sources: Banque de France data (matching the Access to bank financing for companies survey and the FIBEN database).

Notes: (a): % of businesses having requested lines of credit (past 12 months). (b) and (c): % of businesses having requested a loan (past 3 months). Annual averages. These descriptive statistics do not control for the characteristics of businesses or business leaders.

## Inequalities in financial literacy?

How can we explain the fact that female business leaders apply for credit less frequently? Our data analysis shows, first and foremost, that the gender gap cannot be explained by the characteristics observed in businesses and business leaders. For example, the explanation does not reside in the fact that women generally run smaller businesses, nor in their over or under-representation in certain sectors of activity.

To explain this type of gap, the economic literature has long highlighted the fact that women are, on average, more risk-averse or less sure of themselves. However, the most recent

leading-edge studies urge caution in respect of these supposed differences (see, for example, [Bertrand, 2020](#), [Harrisson et al., 2025](#)).

Our working paper highlights the fact that French female business leaders have, on average, a lower level of financial literacy than their male counterparts. This is true regardless of the measure employed: self-assessment by the business leaders themselves or knowledge-based tests. These findings should be viewed with caution as they only apply to new entrepreneurs (less than five years in business). But this is potentially an interesting avenue to explore in the future, both from an analytical perspective, to try to gain a better understanding of why female business leaders make less use of bank credit, and from the perspective of professional associations and public policy, to target support measures for entrepreneurs more effectively.