



The Support Deficit

What Needs to Shift for Women Founders to Thrive

A SURVEY OF 700+ WOMEN FOUNDERS AND SMALL BUSINESS LEADERS ON THE SOLUTIONS NEEDED TO SUPPORT MORE WOMEN IN BUSINESS.

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AGENDA



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We acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

About Women's Agenda

Women's Agenda is an independent daily news publication 100% owned and run by women. Our team of journalists and researchers provide a vital perspective across daily news events and current affairs, including across politics, media, business, tech, climate, health and leadership. Published by Agenda Media Pty Ltd, founded by Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, this team also publishes Women's Health News and runs a growing podcast network, events, roundtables and regular research reports.

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Letter from Women's Agenda

In a time of continued uncertainty, economic pressure and digital transformation, women are still building.

We are launching and scaling businesses, creating jobs, investing in innovation, and pivoting through turbulence.

This report captures this reality and also asks: What more can be done to better support women in Australia, especially given the clear levels of burnout and exhaustion that women are indicating?

In May and June 2025, we heard from hundreds of women founders, co-founders, and leaders of small to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) across Australia. What they shared is powerful, exciting but in some cases sobering.

Overall, we heard their businesses are growing, with 85% saying they plan to hire in the next year, and 80% investing in scaling.

But the extent of the immense strain is also clear. And just 7% of respondents described their businesses as “thriving”.

Women listed concerns about burnout as the top challenge, far ahead of accessing funding or talent. They're feeling squeezed by the cost of doing business, political uncertainty, a perceived lack of support from some places, in addition to other factors, such as caring responsibilities. And while AI tools are being widely adopted, many women leaders say the fundamental transformation is still out of reach, not because of costs, but because they don't have time for experimentation and adoption.

We get it. As co-founders of a growing media business, we too feel the strain of economic uncertainty and the ever-constant juggle of pushing to grow a business while running a business (while also managing caring responsibilities and the realities of daily life).

Importantly, this research is not merely about the challenges women face. Instead, it aims to address what's working for women now, and to consider how Australia can scale on these opportunities.

Flexibility, support, and collaboration are all enabling success for women. Storytelling is also helping, especially stories of other women navigating through similar challenges. These findings show us that women aren't waiting for systems to catch up. They're relying on their networks, utilising the tools they can access, and driving growth on their own terms.

However, they also highlight the opportunities in what women say is lacking: trust in institutions and governments; access to proper funding, mentorship, and support; time and space to lead strategically, not just survive operationally.

Systemically, much can also be done. From establishing more networks that connect women with key decision-makers and investors, to dedicated grants and VC funds, our survey respondents shed light on the practical changes that can be made to help accelerate their growth.



This report is a call to action for policymakers, investors, institutions and communities. Let's build an ecosystem where women are backed to thrive.

It's made possible thanks to CommBank, and we're incredibly grateful for their support once again. This support enables us to promote and profile the incredible tenacity and resilience of women starting and leading businesses in Australia.

Tarla Lambert-Patel & Angela Priestley

Co-Founders, Agenda Media (Women's Agenda)



PARTNER MESSAGE

Letter from CommBank

For the third year, CommBank is proud to support the national insights report with Women's Agenda. This important research continues to shine a light on the experiences of women founders and business leaders across Australia.

This year's findings are both inspiring and sobering. They reveal a community of women who are scaling businesses, creating jobs and embracing innovation— often in the face of immense pressure. The data also highlights a persistent support gap, particularly around mental wellbeing and time to lead strategically.

As a long-standing partner of Women's Agenda, we see this report as more than a snapshot—it's a signal. It tells us where support is working and where there is room to improve. It challenges us to think differently about how institutions can better show up for women in business, whether they're just starting out, running their business day-to-day, or looking to grow.

At CommBank, we're committed to listening, adapting and proactively meeting our customers' needs.

Whether it's through partnerships that support mental fitness, tools that ease the weight of doing business, or platforms that amplify women's voices, we're focused on building practical pathways forward.

When women are backed with the right support, they don't just grow businesses — they transform industries and communities.

To every woman who contributed to this report: thank you. Your insights are shaping how we move forward— together.

Rebecca Warren

*Executive General Manager,
Small Business Banking, CommBank*





Key Research Takeaways ►

Our survey of women founding, running and leading startups or small businesses was shared over three weeks to June 5, 2025, with **more than 700 responding** from across Australia to the callout on [Women's Agenda](#). The survey featured a mix of multiple choice and qualitative questions.

Over half (**52%**) of the respondents have founded or co-founded an established small-to-medium-sized business with between 1-500 employees. Nearly 1 in 3 have co-founded a startup, with a focus on fast growth. A number of our respondents are also in leadership roles at startups or established SMBs.

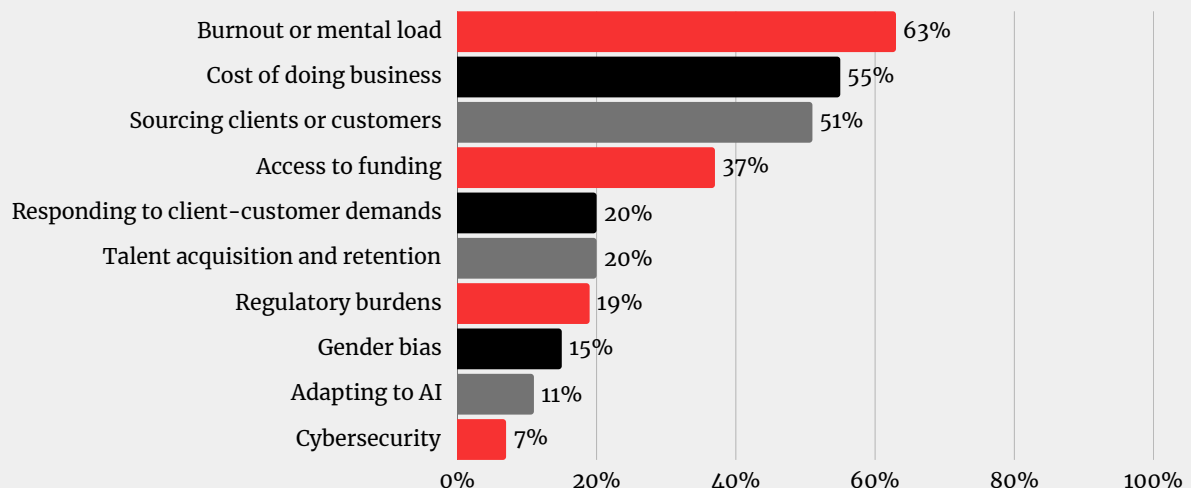
► THE FOUNDERS AND LEADERS IN OUR SURVEY THIS YEAR ARE RUNNING VENTURES AT VARYING STAGES

- **31%** are facing challenges
- **25%** are growing
- **16%** are at an early stage with growth expected
- **6%** are thriving
- **22%** other

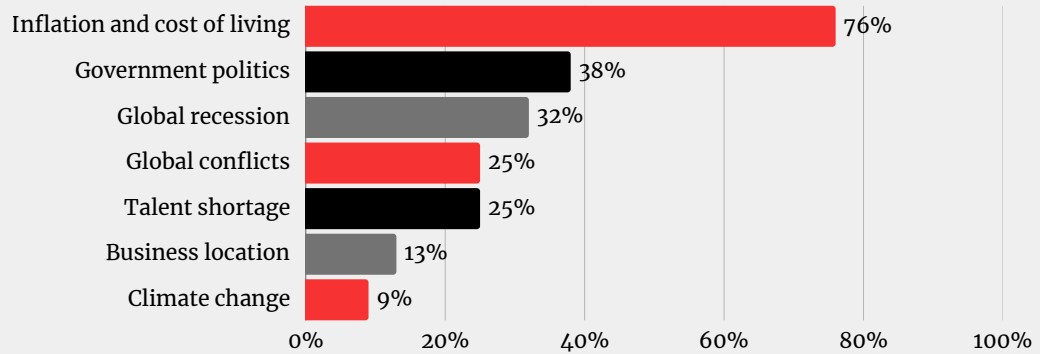
► CREATING JOBS AND BOOSTING THE ECONOMY THROUGH UNCERTAIN TIMES

- **51%** are hiring 1-2 employees
- **24%** are hiring 3-10 employees
- **10%** are hiring 10+ employees

► THE TOP CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN FOUNDERS AND BUSINESS LEADERS



► THE ISSUES NEGATIVELY IMPACTING BUSINESSES



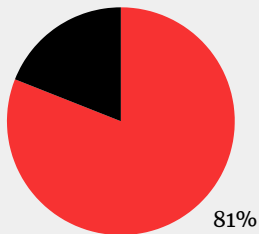
► WOMEN FOUNDERS BENEFIT GREATLY FROM THE SUPPORT OF LOVED ONES

- An overwhelming majority feel supported by their network (83%), friends (77%) or partner (71%)

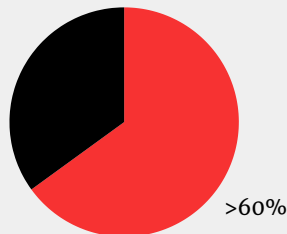
► WOMEN FOUNDERS WANT TO FEEL BETTER SUPPORTED BY

- **76%** state government
- **73%** federal government
- **73%** banking partner
- **40%** general business community
- **33%** suppliers

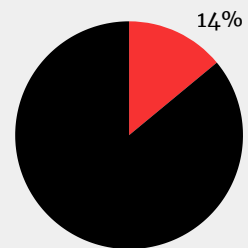
► ADOPTION OF AI



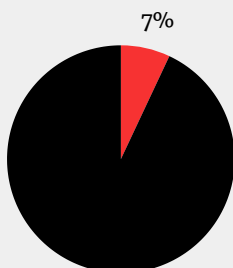
A majority have adopted some form of AI (81%)



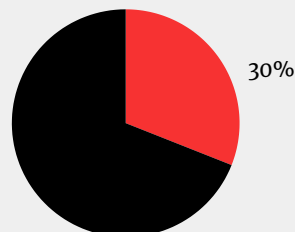
More than 60% have experienced little to moderate change as a result



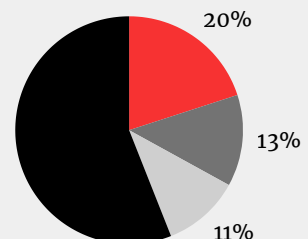
Only 14% have seen a significant transformation in how they operate because of AI



A small fraction (7%) report no change after trying AI tools



Nearly 30% report not having enough time to experiment, which is holding back their adoption



Privacy concerns are also a drawback for 20% followed by the cost of AI tools and platforms (13%) and ethical issues (11%)



Uncertain times:

The challenges women face

The world is in a period of economic and geopolitical instability. Continued cost-of-living concerns and inflation are having a significant impact on consumer spending. Data from CommBank shows the impacts are worse for certain demographics with younger Australians experiencing so much financial pressure they are [cutting back on healthcare](#).

The repercussions of the conflict in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, as well as the Trump administration's approach to global trade are being felt around the world. And it's having an impact on entrepreneurs and businesses at home.

Close to 80% of the women we surveyed said inflation and the cost-of-living are negatively impacting their businesses right now. This shows that the financial pressures on women founders in Australia are growing. In our [2024 SMB report](#), 75% of respondents listed cost-of-living and inflation as their biggest hurdles.

Government policies (38%), global conflicts (25%) and talent shortages (23%) are also hitting hard. Compared to last year, there have been slight declines in the number of women reporting these barriers.

Nearly 1 in 3 women we surveyed said their ventures are being hurt by sluggish markets. In our last [report in 2024](#), 1 in 2 women entrepreneurs reported feeling the impacts of a global recession though one had not been declared. While the figure has dropped, it indicates that inflated economic pressures are continuing to have a negative impact on a significant amount of the founders and business leaders we've heard from.

Reduced consumer confidence and spending, paired with market volatility and a [slowdown in business](#) investment, have added to the challenges our survey respondents are facing. And these come on top of existing barriers such as access to resources, networks and private capital.

The recent [State of Australian Startup Funding Report](#) provides a somewhat discouraging snapshot of the landscape for women founders. Of more than 400 reported deals amounting to \$4 billion, only 27% involved a team with at least one woman founder. For teams founded solely by women, they secured just 9% of the deals.

Our survey reveals a noticeable gap in support for women entrepreneurs and business leaders regarding systemic support and access to capital. More than 1 in 3 women said access to capital is one of the biggest challenges they're facing.

More than 70% do not feel supported by their state or federal government. Many also feel unsupported by the broader startup ecosystem.

Several survey respondents emphasised the need for procurement opportunities to be more inclusive of women-owned and women-led businesses. One respondent even suggested that governments implement a gender equality framework that directs contracts and projects towards companies that employ enough women and are led or owned by women.

Opportunity blocked: the procurement problem

Survey respondents open up about a major hurdle

“Capital funding opportunities with only 2% of funds going to women in Australia, this needs to be federally supported to grow.”

“Access to capital is a major hurdle, with 43% of women-led small businesses citing it as a key obstacle to growth.”

“Mandated procurement strategies and targets for government-funded projects, by federal, state and local government.”

The factors driving burnout

With all of these challenges and ongoing uncertainty, [women are burning out](#) at alarming rates.

[The Women's Agenda 2025 Ambitions report](#) has found that women continue to experience high rates of burnout and our survey this year has found it is one of the biggest issues for 63% of respondents.

Business owners typically face high levels of uncertainty, risk, and stress. However, several years of unpredictability stemming from the COVID pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, growing geopolitical unrest and recent trade tensions have added to the complexity of what women in business are grappling with.

This survey found that the cost of doing business is the second leading challenge, affecting close to 55% of our respondents, while sourcing new clients was marked as an issue for more than 1 in 2 respondents.

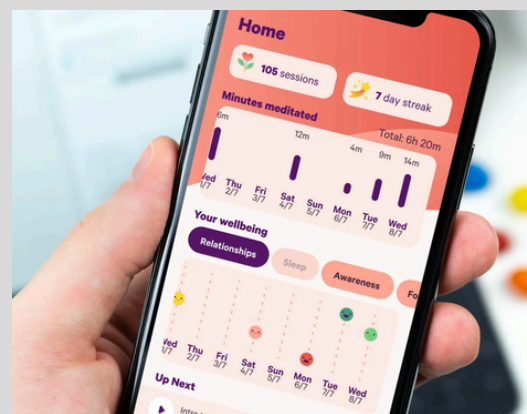
Other key challenges included responding to client demands, talent acquisition and retention as well as regulatory burdens. For a smaller proportion of respondents, gender bias, AI and cybersecurity were listed as the main challenges for their businesses.


Despite these many issues, women founders and business leaders are pushing ahead and navigating pathways to success. Not only are they managing to grow their ventures through adversity, but they are also creating opportunities for others through job creation and revenue generation for the economy.

MENTAL WELLBEING IN BUSINESS

There are resources available for small business owners and entrepreneurs navigating the immense pressures of today's world. The [‘Business Mental Fitness’](#) app created by non-profit Smiling Mind and CommBank offers evidence-based insights on managing stress and mental health. The toolkit features practical tips from psychologists and health promotion experts.

Organisations like [Global Sisters](#) also offer long-term support to women building businesses. Its focus on building financial resilience, connection and removing barriers for women is making a difference around the world.





“If society wants us to be superheroes, it’s time to support our superpowers.”

How Sharon Zeev Poole is navigating burnout as a business owner in the ‘Sandwich Generation’

Sharon Zeev Poole has been running her Sydney-based PR agency for 18 years, through significant evolutions and upheavals that have hit the industry.

But she believes what business leaders are experiencing now is unlike anything she’s faced before. She says it’s likely unprecedented for women who also happen to be part of the ‘Sandwich Generation’ – those squeezed between caring for children and ageing parents.

She’s concerned about the risk of burnout for women in business.

“We’re leading businesses through economic uncertainty, high inflation, the advent of AI, and shifting consumer demands, all while also managing school pickups, medical emergencies, and heart-wrenching decisions about aging parents,” she says.

“We’re not just balancing. We’re constantly adjusting. And in doing so, we’ve developed a superpower.

“We are deeply capable and resilient, but that very resilience is often weaponised against us. The more we handle, the more we’re expected to handle. We’re exhausted. And yet, this invisible load is part of what makes us exceptional and gritty business leaders.”

Poole believes there are three key areas that can help “lift this generation of wrecked, passionate women up”:

1. “Policies that reflect dual-caregiving realities and more support infrastructure. We have parental leave, but we need the government to extend this to also support elder care and emergency caregiving. Additionally, making a serious investment in affordable childcare, elder care and mental health services is critical.
2. “Shifting away from a ‘work-life’ balance mentality. Let’s face it: it doesn’t always hold up and then we’re left feeling bad for the part of our life that gets ignored. Sometimes we’ll need to prioritise home more; sometimes we’ll need to prioritise work more. It’s way more integrated, than balanced, and the sooner we can accept this and build this into our team’s fabric, the better we will be.
3. “Stronger peer networks. We need to lean on each other and create a community of like-minded women going through the same experiences to access emotional and practical support.

“We need to redefine what leadership looks like as a society. It’s not about pushing through silently without asking for more support. It’s about helping ourselves, while also helping others. If society wants us to be superheroes, it’s time to support our superpowers.”



The challenges and opportunities of AI

AI is transforming how women do business in Australia, with new AI-powered tools and solutions emerging every day, offering entrepreneurs and business leaders the chance to explore new ways they might optimise time, complete tasks and reach customers.

But it's also come with a plethora of questions around ethics, privacy and security. The lightning speed at which it's advancing is also a [challenge for many](#) trying to keep up.

Despite this, women leaders and founders are moving fast. More than 80% of survey respondents have adopted an AI tool of some sort in their work. The vast majority have experienced benefits, but the extent of this impact differs.

Around 60% of respondents reported little to moderate change in their business through AI adoption – most of this being from efficiency gains. Just 14% of women said AI has “significantly” transformed how they operate. And a small fraction (7%) said the AI tools they tried made no difference to their ventures.

Time is a significant barrier to the adoption of AI. With founders and leaders focused on growing the business, there is often limited capacity to research and experiment with new tools and apps that may not yield a return on investment.

Just under 30% of respondents listed a ‘lack of time to experiment’ as a key barrier to adopting AI.

1 in 5 women founders and business leaders said privacy was the main barrier holding them back from adoption. The cost of tools or platforms, ethical concerns and a lack of understanding or training were also found to be holding back around 10 to 13% of respondents.

While these drawbacks exist, more than half of respondents (53%) plan on investing in AI and automation as a growth strategy.

These survey results reveal that while women are willing to embrace AI, practical issues like time constraints, questions about privacy and high costs are hindering more widespread and transformative adoption.

This is important to consider, given other research has identified a gender gap in the uptake of generative AI. However, a [Salesforce study](#) has found that women in executive roles are adopting AI quicker than their male peers.

Women's Agenda has spoken to [executives taking innovative steps](#) to shift the dial on AI adoption. Friendly hackathons and women's workshops that provide a safe space for people to discuss how they're using AI and experiment with it can go a long way.

With time being a key barrier for founders and small business leaders, the adoption of AI needs to happen in a strategic and efficient way.

The impact women founders make

In the face of economic volatility, gender bias, and other challenges, women founders and business leaders continue to grow their ventures and make a lasting impact. The level of grit they embody is evident in the way they navigate tough conditions and achieve their goals.

Meanwhile, women pursuing this work are also often taking on significant caring responsibility, including for young children, older loved ones and others.

And they're also committed to work in the community, with 76% of respondents saying they are involved in additional community work or groups like volunteering at schools, or managing a sports team and club associations.

This shows women founders are making impacts well beyond their own ventures. Research has also found that women are slightly [more likely than men](#) to engage in unpaid work for social impact.

The economic and social benefits volunteers around Australia make are enormous. Recent data shows these contributions amount to billions of dollars in value. One report [estimated the social and economic value](#) generated by volunteers across Australia in 2023 at more than \$550 billion.

However, high levels of burnout and the impacts of COVID can be seen in the slowing down of volunteering. [National Strategy for Volunteering](#) has found the average number of hours people spend volunteering has declined.

The silent [crisis of the 'sandwich generation'](#) is also a growing concern with an increasing number of businesswomen falling into the squeeze between caring for children and ageing parents. [Gendered imbalances in caring](#) and home duties are adding further pressure on time-constrained women who may then be forced to pull back from additional work like volunteering.

Our survey has found that despite time-constraints and burnout, a majority of women will find a way to contribute to their communities. But the pressure they're under cannot continue to be the norm. It highlights the critical need for systemic change and initiatives that can help alleviate some of these burdens so they can sustainably contribute and continue making an impact.





Creating jobs and boosting the economy

Of the women we surveyed, 85% plan to hire more people in the coming year. Of the 700-plus founders and business leaders, 51% plan to hire 1–2 people. 24% want to hire between 3–10 new employees, and 10% are looking at hiring 10 or more new staff.

Our [survey last year](#) uncovered similar results with 75% of respondents noting they would be hiring new staff in the near future. This shows that even in the face of what could be debilitating challenges, entrepreneurial women and business leaders are finding a way to succeed.

Making a social impact

Research shows that startups founded by women [are more likely to create social impact](#) that benefits others in the community. Many of the women we have surveyed over the past three years have shared a desire to create social good through their ventures.

A recent report by [Grant Thornton International](#) looking into the impacts of women in business also states that female entrepreneurs are more likely to prioritise social impact and sustainability. However, it said that failure to properly invest in these women could lead to another “generation of missed opportunity”.

In Australia, this would be felt immensely in missed economic and social contributions that women founders and business leaders make.

Economic contribution

Around 1 in 3 small businesses in Australia are [owned or led by a woman](#). Through the many problems they’re solving, job creation and revenue generation for the economy, they’re changing the landscape of entrepreneurship. However, they remain an untapped market with investors, funding partners and other key stakeholders still failing to realise their value.

‘Please the customer,
but stay true to your
brand.’

How Kristy Dickinson is growing her business and making a difference

Proud Wiradjuri woman Kristy Dickinson runs Haus of Dizzy, a jewellery and merch brand that celebrates and honours Indigenous culture. She designs and makes the jewellery from a studio in Naarm (Melbourne).

Her biggest challenge is finding the right staff who believe in everything the brand is about.

“Staff need to be on your playing field,” she says.

“It's also so hard to find what customers want. I'm always like, what do you guys want? Just tell me. Finding those right products that you know are going to sell. You want to please a customer, but you've always got to stay true to your brand.

“I do a little mentoring at schools and juvenile justice centres. When they ask me how do I create a brand? I always say: it's you, it's your story.

“You need to be true to whatever you believe in.”

Over the next 12 months, Dickinson is keen to invest in corporate workshops, team bonding and expanding the business.

“We are working on merch for lots of different organisations and companies – building merch for their business. We're starting to do that and just really push the corporate game, because that's where the money's at and they have the money to spend,” she says.

As she grows her business, social issues remain close to Dickinson's heart.



Having an impact in these areas is an important part of her journey as an entrepreneur.

“When my customers tell me when they put the flags on, their back gets straight and their shoulders go back, and they can just take on the world, I mean, the Aboriginal flag earrings are my favourite earrings to make and wear, and I just feel the same,” she says.

“I'm so happy that I can give some pride, make somebody feel their pride by putting a pair of earrings in.”

Dickinson recently did a workshop at a juvenile justice girls centre and found herself deeply moved when she got to share her story with a young person who was having a tough time.

“She'd been in and out of trouble and I told her my story, just where I come from,” she says.

“I came from nothing. I had a single mum in housing commission. I never thought I'd have my own business. I just told her my story, and she just really appreciated it.

“She wrote me a note saying how much I inspired her, and she's going to stay out of trouble, and she's going to go and work with her mum in a shop.

“So that was really special to me. I have that letter that she wrote to me on my desk. Whenever I feel a bit stressed, I look at that and I'm like ‘okay, get back to work, get the job done’.”



Where founders feel most supported

The journey of building a successful business or startup can be exhilarating but it can come with many challenges and unexpected turns. Women can face additional obstacles, such as unconscious bias among investors or the burden of unpaid care work.

‘Sexism shouldn’t be normal’

Survey respondents share their experiences and thoughts about sexism in the startup and business sector

“ There's so much sexism. I had a chairman tell me he couldn't fund any women founders because to do so would be discrimination against men and he 'refused' to discriminate (no kidding). ”

“ [We need] improved perception of female-led entrepreneurs as just as resourceful, successful and powerful as male entrepreneurs. ”

“ I sometimes wonder if I would have progressed the business further if I was a man. ”

“ Women don't feel like a priority, or a considered minority in tech investment. ”

“ I would like to be taken seriously by angel investors. ”

“ Sexism is normal ... the blokes club exists where anything goes. ”

“ I'd like to see women's voices being acted upon rather than waiting until a man says the same thing. ”

“ [There needs to be an] attitude that these are businesses not hobbies or side hustles. ”

Fortunately, the women we heard from feel greatly supported by the people closest to them. For 83% of our respondents, they feel most supported by their network which can include fellow entrepreneurs, corporate clients or partners. This is closely followed by friends (77%) and an intimate partner or spouse (71%).

This highlights the importance of informal support systems for women in business and entrepreneurship. The support and connection from trusted relationships can be pivotal in their lives. Not only can it offer a buffer during difficult times but it can open doors to new opportunities, clients and collaborations.

These networks – both personal and professional – have come up as fundamental to success in each SMB survey we have run. Last year, it emerged as a [linchpin of success](#) with over 80% of respondents citing it as their greatest asset. In 2023, 83% of the women we surveyed listed their network as a [leading source of support](#).

Strong networks can have a significant impact on business success. The connections, confidence, mentoring, opportunities and referrals they bring can accelerate a founder's growth.

Other factors that help empower women founders

Flexible working: The rise in flexible working has also allowed more women to pursue entrepreneurship. 90% of the women we surveyed said flexibility around when and where they work has been beneficial. The remaining respondents reported that they are unable to access flexible work options.

Networking events: Close to 70% of respondents find group networking beneficial. Opportunities for women in various industries to connect and make meaningful connections can boost their chances of success and growth. This not only helps the founders involved, but has ripple effects through job creation, revenue generation and other impacts.

Online business resources: Nearly 70% of respondents have found the plethora of online resources, tools, connections, and education to be greatly beneficial to their businesses.

Industry-specific associations: Similar to meaningful networks, these types of associations can provide founders and business leaders with invaluable connections, insights and support. More than 60% of our survey respondents report that these industry-specific groups are beneficial.

Government grants: Around 1 in 4 respondents listed government grants as beneficial. We found a strong desire for more government grants, with many of the founders and business leaders we heard from (nearly 60%) noting they have not had access to such funding and support.

Women founders want to feel better supported by the broader industry

The women we surveyed cite things like mentoring, business accelerators and grants as extremely beneficial, but many still struggle to gain access to these.

Our survey respondents say they want to feel better supported by governments, corporate partners and other institutions. Around 1 in 3 also want to be better supported by suppliers and the general business community.



Women in business are calling for respect and support

Survey respondents share their experiences and thoughts on why the perceived value of women leaders must change

“ Greater understanding across corporate and government that running a small business means you can't just stop to have coffees with people because you don't get paid for it like FTEs do; that if you cancel on me it is a BIG deal because resources are scarce to find a replacement; and running a small business means one minute you're the delivery driver, the next minute you're the CEO. ”

“ Single women are the most likely to end up homeless. It's hard to be a woman in business and it's scary with lack of financial support. ”

“ Childcare is incredible and I am so grateful for the services we have available, but as a small business owner, having more than one option would dramatically improve my ability to balance work and family. ”

Our survey respondents say the perception and value of women founders and small business leaders needs to change so barriers can be unlocked. Women founders and businesses offer billions of dollars in [untapped potential](#). Despite working with a wide range of limitations, they push ahead and are making exciting contributions to the economy.

Hundreds of women around the country who are working on their own businesses have explicitly told us through this survey what can make a difference. As we work on levelling the playing field, greater investment in women-focused accelerators, mentoring programs and funding initiatives can go a long way.





Next steps and recommendations

We now have three years of survey results from women entrepreneurs and business leaders in Australia. Each time, they have shared their experiences of what's driving their success despite barriers, and what they believe the keys are to unlocking systemic change.

These women continue to work in a rapidly changing environment burdened by economic pressures, market volatility and disruptive tech. But again, our report this year reveals their sheer level of grit, ambition and tenacity – which has allowed them to persevere not just through the [unprecedented pandemic](#), but in this sustained climate of instability that's being [driven by several factors](#). AICD chief economist Mark Thirlwell GAID says “with so much upheaval, predicting the path of the Australian economy almost requires an astrologer”.

Any business leader or entrepreneur would be feeling the pressure of this uncertainty. But as our surveys over the past three years, along with supporting research show – women are experiencing added stressors and systemic gender-based barriers.

The alarming levels of burnout uncovered in our survey are linked to unrelenting barriers identified in our research and other studies. These include issues like [burden of care at home](#) or [limited access to capital](#)

stemming from bias among investors and lending partners. These issues can add further pressure on women who take on the innately tough and challenging journey of entrepreneurship.

Despite this, women in business are creating jobs, injecting revenue into the economy and looking to scale up. Over the next 12 months, these entrepreneurs and business leaders will push ahead and take their ventures to new heights. A majority (81%) of respondents will be investing in scaling and growth strategies.

Aside from AI and automation, they will also be investing in financial planning (38%) as well as managing both team and personal wellbeing (33%). Around 1 in 5 will also be investing in sustainability practices and cyber security.

This research shows what women entrepreneurs and business leaders are capable of with the odds stacked against them. The question is how far would they go if the playing field was levelled, if procurement opportunities and access to capital for them mirrored what their male counterparts get, or if there was no gendered imbalance in caring obligations?

And what if larger institutions, the broader business community and all levels of government took proactive steps to create a fairer system and society for women in business?

What can make a difference

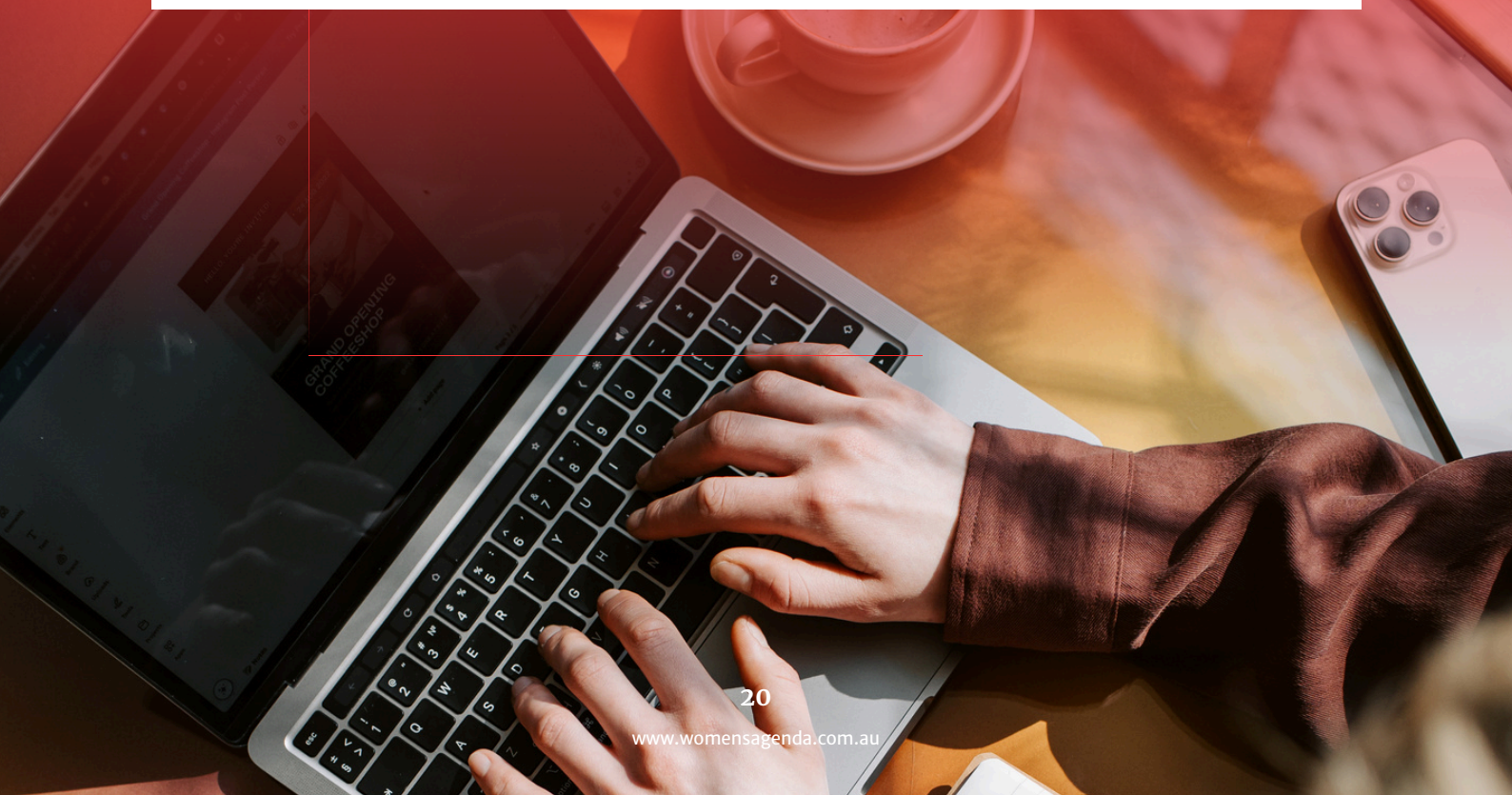
Based on the results of our survey and what respondents have shared, the following recommendations have been developed by Women's Agenda as a framework for the broader startup and small business sector, including key stakeholders that continue to shape and influence it.

Ensure equitable access to funding

Our survey and [recent data on capital raised by founders](#) in Australia paint a bleak picture of funding opportunities for women. According to Cut Through Venture, 2025 is on track to becoming the [worst year on record](#) for capital raised by female-only founding teams. This is holding women back and it needs to be addressed.

- **Recommendations by Women's Agenda:**

- Existing VC funds, investors and lending partners can review their selection processes for conscious or unconscious bias, take proactive steps to implement more inclusive methods of connecting with diverse founders and leaders, and ensure women and diverse voices are at the decision-making table.
- The creation of loans, dedicated grant programs and investment opportunities focused on empowering women founders and levelling the playing field.
- Ensure funding opportunities and support are not limited to early-stage entrepreneurs so that women are supported as their ventures mature.
- Corporate partnership opportunities that give women-led SMBs a chance to expand their product or service with a larger player in the market.
- And as we have previously recommended, create more women-centric circles that seek out female founders and business leaders to back and work with long-term.



Build networks, an essential lifeline

In previous years, this survey has found that networks can be a game-changer and 2025's findings are no different. Women thrive when they're supported by trusted personal connections and professional networks that bolster access to industry, new clients, investors and mentors. Some of these connections can lead to lifelong friendships and empower entrepreneurs in their journey. While there are a growing number of entrepreneur groups dedicated to women, the need for key figures like banking partners, investors and potential business partners to become a regular part of them remains.

- **Recommendations by Women's Agenda:**

- Introduce more corporate or government-backed networking events that allow women to connect, share ideas and hear from highly successful female founders or leaders.
- Dedicated social events for women founders who are also parents that may offer access to childcare or a creche, so they can have opportunities to meet, network and build business connections while balancing care obligations.
- Support organisations like [One Roof](#), [Tech Ready Women Founders](#), [The Women's Collective](#) or [Global Sisters](#) to create more opportunities for female founders to connect and collaborate.
- Not all women have trusted and supportive intimate partners or relatives – it's important to create opportunities for these founders to find their tribe and make connections that can be there for them as they grow their ventures.
- As more women enter the field, companies and institutions should support opportunities for women to link up with investors, mentors and potential business partners which could help unlock doors and accelerate success.



Break down bias and stereotypes

Women entrepreneurs have told us they experience gendered stereotypes and outdated societal expectations. Some say they aren't always taken seriously, or have their assertiveness regarded poorly.

- **Recommendations by Women's Agenda:**

- Women play a role in taking charge of their success and navigating business challenges, but their efforts must be mirrored by the systems and structures they're operating in.
- The broader business community, investment groups, institutions and governments should continue to reflect on their unconscious and conscious biases, the processes they have in place and their perception of women business leaders who have been punching above their weight but are not being valued for their contributions.
- Key decision-makers and investors must be willing to critically self-reflect, whether through active learning courses or otherwise, and take active steps to level the playing field and drive progress.

Take steps to lower the risk of burnout

Burnout and stress are being reported at alarming rates. This is not only harmful to the health of women entrepreneurs but it poses a serious threat to the longevity of Australia's small business and startup ecosystem. It's crucial that entrepreneurs and leaders are supported with evidence-based tools that boost mental health and sustainable growth.

- **Recommendations by Women's Agenda:**

- Organisations should connect with non-profits in the mental health space like [Smiling Mind](#) to develop and share evidence-based solutions for managing stress and mental health.
 - Smiling Mind and CommBank have released a [mental health and wellbeing app](#) dedicated to entrepreneurs, which has practical tools and insights from psychologists and wellness experts.
- Initiatives like [Mentor Walks](#) are building communities for professional women to connect with inspiring CEOs, directors and executives while taking a stroll. Mentor Walks' community has risen to more than 14,500 women across Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Dubai – giving women a way to find meaningful connection, clarity and support.
- The broader business and corporate sector should continue to back sponsored mental health programs to help SMBs and founders manage the bumps and shocks that can come with entrepreneurship and develop long-term coping and resilience strategies.



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Create a system that works for women not against them

Affordable childcare, flexibility, paid parental leave, a rethink on leadership and how workplaces operate can all help level the playing field for entrepreneurial women who are fighting the odds to build successful businesses. Women are actively taking steps to redefine how business is done, and Australia is seeing the benefits both economically and through the improved wellbeing of people being able to work in more inclusive spaces.

Women in today's uncertain and volatile world are doing it all and the expectations on them to take on more is growing. But as entrepreneur Poole puts it, "if society wants women to be superheroes, maybe it's time to support their superpowers".





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