

Women in Business South Australia

The barriers facing women in business in 2026

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE WOMEN'S AGENDA AND COMMBANK ROUNDTABLE FOR WOMEN LEADING SMALL TO MEDIUM BUSINESSES (SMBS). THIS RESEARCH BUILDS ON OUR 2025 REPORT SURVEYING WOMEN IN BUSINESS AROUND AUSTRALIA: 'THE SUPPORT DEFICIT: WHAT NEEDS TO SHIFT FOR WOMEN FOUNDERS TO THRIVE'.



Supported by CommBank Women in Focus



Commonwealth
Bank

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.

Get in contact with our team at
contact@womensagenda.com.au

Contents

4

Introduction

6

The Adelaide Roundtable

8

The lived experience

11

In For The Long Run

How to build a thriving SMB sector for women in South Australia

12

Women's Agenda Recommendations

How institutions and partner organisations can support women-led SMBs

15

Women's Agenda Recommendations

Ideas for women founders from Adelaide's roundtable



Introduction

South Australia is in the midst of significant change. The re-instated Labor government is working towards a [target of 50%](#) women and Indigenous peoples on government boards and committees.

The Labor government, which recently broke a record for [representation of women in cabinet](#), has pledged to keep women's economic opportunity a priority. As part of this agenda, it has vowed to continue building opportunity and breaking down barriers for women in business, boardrooms, politics and sport.

Its [recent Royal Commission](#) into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence brought the horrific truth of this crisis to the top of the agenda, while also offering hope through a series of steps that could be taken to bring it to an end. Several reforms are already in motion as the government works to implement [Commissioner Natasha Stott Despoja AO's recommendations](#) including a dedicated ministerial portfolio to combat the issue.

In line with this, it's critical that women in South Australia have fair and equitable access to economic opportunities including in business. Women's participation in the workforce in South Australia falls behind most other parts of Australia. According to the state's [Women's Equality Blueprint](#), a three-year plan to 2026, the labour force participation rate for women is 60.4% – the second lowest nationally.

When it comes to women business owners, the state's [Office for Women reports](#) that South Australia sits just shy of the national average with 40% of small businesses being female. The state's latest [Investing in Equality](#) notes that access to capital remains a barrier for women-led businesses with 82% believing gender has negatively impacted their ability to raise venture capital.

It's an issue that has been going on for years. A [2022 Business Aspirations report](#) by the South Australian Premier's Council of Women found the majority of female founders surveyed used their own personal savings to build their ventures with 'lack of capital' being one of their top barriers. Caring responsibilities was another – the unequal burden of care on women is an issue that has long [been documented](#).

For women of diverse backgrounds, these issues may be further compounded. A Deloitte study into maximising the value of [South Australia's migrant community](#) found additional barriers like difficulties with skill recognition if someone has developed their expertise overseas, discrimination and a failure to fully recognise their value or qualifications.



“ We have such a strong and exciting future ahead in South Australia. We are growing jobs in construction, in advanced manufacturing, in defence and space and renewables. We have this incredible time and an agenda ahead of us. I want to make sure that women are participating fully in all of those opportunities. ”

Katrine Hildyar,
South Australia's Minister for Women

In our [2025 CommBank SMBs](#) report, we heard from hundreds of women founders and business leaders around the country who have been fighting the odds to achieve success. The discussions we have hosted during our roundtables and other research we explore in this report show women are not on a level playing field. As SMB founders and leaders they are navigating imbalances at home, systemic barriers and gender bias.

Women's Agenda wants to change this. With the support of CommBank, we are working to draw more insights from business leaders around the country. Their lived experiences are invaluable in identifying areas prime for change and we have used these to develop practical solutions going forward.

The Adelaide Roundtable

On 25 September 2025, Women's Agenda and CommBank hosted a roundtable discussion in Adelaide bringing together an inspiring group of 44 women business leaders based in South Australia. They sit at different stages and operate across a wide range of industries such as health, tech, communications and finance.

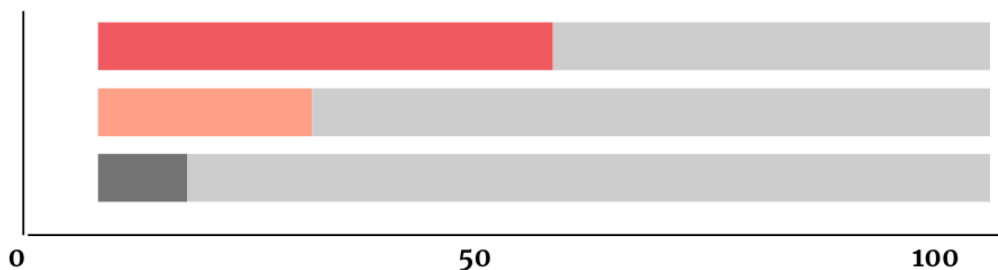
And as we found in our [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#) on women starting, leading and scaling businesses, a majority of those at the roundtable have been growing and hiring despite unique challenges compounded by the volatility of recent economic and geopolitical conditions.

The discussion revealed not just their ambition for growth, but also a deep resilience, with some attendees running businesses for well over a decade. Many of their insights reflected the national trends we uncovered.

Our survey revealed the profound impact women in business make:

▶ JOB CREATION

- An overwhelming 85% plan to hire in the next year. This commitment to job growth is substantial and presents a vital injection at a time when [unemployment is creeping up](#):



- 51% plan to hire 1-2 new employees
- 24% plan to hire 3-10 new employees
- 10% plan to hire 10 or more new employees

▶ INVESTING IN SCALING UP:

- Ambition is matched by action, with 80% of women entrepreneurs actively investing in strategies to scale their ventures, signalling a focus on long-term growth.

▶ COMMUNITY IMPACT:

- Research shows startups founded by women are more likely to [create social impact](#). A remarkable 76% are involved in additional unpaid community work, such as volunteering, building stronger and more connected communities across the state.

Despite this, we found in our survey of more than 700 women building and leading businesses that just 7% describe their businesses as “thriving”. It’s a stunning figure, considering the growth and impacts these founders are making.

While most women (83%) surveyed said they feel supported by their network—such as other women in business and their family and friends—more than 70% said they don’t feel supported by their state or territory government, and the same number said they don't feel supported by the federal government. One in three don’t feel supported by suppliers and 40% feel support is lacking from the broader business community.

As Women’s Agenda Co-Founder, Angela Priestley, explained at the Adelaide roundtable, this perceived lack of support is why we called our recent SMB report The Support Deficit—because we strongly believe that by targeting support infrastructure, that 7% figure may lift and more women in business can feel like they are thriving.

Our findings show that women-led businesses are not being fostered by the broader ecosystem and in fact, they’re being constrained. Through our roundtables, we hope to inspire a new way forward. The following insights provide a raw account of what continues to hold women in business back, and what steps can be taken to level the playing field.



The lived experience

Key challenges and ideas for change from South Australian SMB leaders

South Australian SMB leaders are helping to reshape the state's business and economic landscape. They are growing their ventures, hiring staff and navigating new legislation while also tackling systemic issues like the burden of care, gender bias and violence against women.

During our roundtable, women spoke about the importance of having meaningful and strategic connections in the sector. In complex industries like healthcare and tech, women building earlier stage ventures noted how helpful it could be to have more experienced mentors, experts and investors to work with.

They also talked about some of the more practical challenges they encounter as they lead and build their businesses day to day.

1. The mental load is real

“How do you do everything all at once, all the time, for everybody?”

This comment by [Lashes of Change](#) founder Tania Jolley, at the Adelaide roundtable for women entrepreneurs and leaders sums up what could be behind the alarming rates of burnout Women's Agenda has been finding in its research.

A notable number of the women we heard from during the roundtable are also parents with young children.

Among them was a business owner whose child wasn't even two years old when she launched her latest venture.

She emphasised the importance of women acknowledging the mental load they carry between caring for family and loved ones, maintaining the home and also managing the evolving needs of their business. .

“There is a lot on your plate, being a woman in a leadership role running multiple businesses, and having a little one running around who's changing everyday,” she said.

“It's having the time to pause and acknowledge that it's okay, and to remind yourself, ‘well, actually, there is a lot on my plate’ and just reprioritising who you can have around you to offer support.

“But also, I've noticed that there has been a lot to learn over the last 18 months, and you can get more efficient in the way you do things.”

2. Keeping up with AI

Rapid advancements in AI are transforming almost every industry. The industries our roundtable participants represent including health, tech, communications and finance, are all experiencing high levels of disruption.

For many of the women executives at the table, this has presented them with an exciting opportunity to transform workflows, alleviate administrative burden and improve how they connect with customers.

Emerging research shows women in executive roles are adopting generative AI at the same speed or, in some cases, faster than their male peers. In [research led by Salesforce](#), female C-suite executives in Australia were found to be outpacing their male peers. Half of the women executives surveyed said they use generative AI “all the time” while only 38% of men at that level said they do the same.

In a separate [study by Boston Consulting Group](#), surveying thousands of men and women across Germany, India, Japan, the US and the UK, it found senior women in tech functions were ahead of their male counterparts in their adoption of generative AI.

More than half of the respondents we surveyed in our [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#) said they plan on investing in AI and automation as a growth strategy. But discussions at the roundtable also revealed some real pain points and concerns that leaders need to navigate, such as privacy, accuracy and ethical use.

Jolley also noted that time constraints made it challenging for some small businesses to experiment and determine how to optimise these new technologies.

“I'm just constantly bombarded these days with AI,” she said.

“It is going at a monumental pace, and I do feel a lot of pressure – it just gives me an overwhelming feeling, looking and watching it all pass by.

“I get that feeling that I should be paying more attention to this. I know that it's important, but how do you do everything, all at once, all the time, for everybody?”

3. 'We need our voices heard'

It is crucial that women SMB leaders have their voices heard. Their insights, wisdom and expertise help provide a fuller picture of the evolving business landscape in Australia. In industries where they dominate like [healthcare and NDIS](#), it's vital that policymakers and government bodies ensure their insights are considered when creating or amending legislation.

At the Adelaide roundtable, participants in the disability sector discussed how changing legislation was impacting their ability to be there for clients.

ActivOT founder and franchisor Helen Whait, who runs a national occupational therapy business, noted that legislative changes were being made at a significant cost to community members.

"[As women] we understand the mental load of our people, and we value our people, we are nurturers, and that's a wonderful thing," Whait said.

"In my business, I feel like I'm thriving [but] I feel like I'm drowning with governmental policy changes. From my experience, occupational therapy is a female-dominated profession, and we are just not being listened to, especially in the NDIS and the aged care space and that's incredibly frustrating.

"How do we get a voice at that table, to actually help [the government] make the right decisions to protect people and support people with disabilities and who are aging, but also to support our profession?"

"There has to be a win-win. At the moment, it feels like there's just bulldozers going through.

"It's really important as women that our voices are amplified and we do get heard."



In for the long run

How to build a thriving SMB sector for women in South Australia

Entrepreneurs today are navigating a volatile world with economic curveballs and rapidly evolving technology. The current cost-of-living and sluggish growth has been felt by many. A recent quarterly report by the [South Australian Business Chamber](#) found persistent issues with cost pressures, weak profitability and regulatory burden.

Despite this, our research and the insights we've gathered at the Adelaide roundtable show these conditions are not slowing down ambitions. SMB leaders in South Australia are instead pushing ahead, growing their teams and investing in innovative tools to scale-up.

▶ 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

[[2025 CommBank SMBc report](#)]

One veteran entrepreneur at the roundtable said adaptability, a wise aversion to risk and resilience are core drivers for success.

"There were different challenges that I saw 25 years ago to what I see today, but at the end of the day, that's exactly what they are," she said.

"It's always been tough for people and every single day there's new and different challenges.

"It's about us really working on our mindset to deal with these challenges.

"There's always a way through."

Based on conversations with business leaders and key stakeholders across the broader SMB sector in South Australia, Women's Agenda has identified some important steps that can be taken to ensure businesses led by women are not only given a fair go but that the systems they operate in foster sustainable growth.



Women's Agenda

Recommendations

How institutions and partner organisations can support women-led SMBs

Our Adelaide roundtable made one thing clear: women at the forefront of Australia's SMB sector are making an impact and creating change. Their insights, experiences and ideas are critical to the state's broader business and economic landscape.

For South Australia to have a healthy and sustainable SMB sector, it is crucial that women have a seat at the table. Whether in discussions with government leaders about policy, investors looking for opportunities to back or on procurement panels. Corporate partners, governments and institutions can play a powerful role in making this happen.

Corporate partnerships

CommBank offers a range of programs and opportunities for women to participate in, including [traineeships for Indigenous students](#) and the [Career Comeback Program](#) for professionals returning to work. Plus, there's the Women in Focus partnership with [Women's Agenda](#), which helps raise the profile of women's voices, gather data on the challenges and opportunities they face, while also hosting events for connection and mentoring.

Corporate partners can make a big difference by stepping up in this way. They may wish to launch a department aimed at supporting programs and initiatives for women SMB leaders. They can also opt to fund one-off networking events that create

an opportunity for business leaders to meet and connect with mentors or other key stakeholders like investors or suppliers. Partnering with an organisation like [Women's Agenda](#) can help corporate organisations work out how best to support women in their state.

Address bias and unlock capital

The cost of doing business and getting access to funding were among the top challenges founders and business leaders reported in the [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#). At the roundtable in Adelaide, women discussed some of the barriers and bias they encounter day to day. Access to government contracts was also raised.

The South Australian government is working to open up opportunities for women-led SMBs. Initiatives like the [Women in Business Foundations Program](#) or [Fearless Innovator Grants](#) are dedicated to connecting women SMB leaders with the resources, contacts and funding to take their ventures to new heights.

But further work can be done within government and more broadly to identify and address bias that may be keeping women out of certain spaces. [Unconscious bias training](#) and cultural competency programs can help organisations get better at levelling the playing field.

By ensuring investor panels have diversity or ensuring screening questions are gender neutral, these can help remove some of the additional barriers women and people of diverse backgrounds face.

Governments can also take steps to ensuring their tenders actively seek out SMB leaders of diverse backgrounds. Events for women to connect with key stakeholders and information sessions to raise more awareness about the tender process may encourage more women to pursue government contracts.



Networks and mentoring

The Adelaide roundtable was an invaluable opportunity for women SMB leaders across the state to connect. For many participants it was a rare opportunity to step out of the hustle of building their businesses to connect with peers and corporate executives over knowledge, grievances and inspiration.

Nearly 70% of the women surveyed in the [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#) said they find networking beneficial. During the roundtable, women expressed how powerful meaningful connections can be in business. As more and more women become business leaders and owners, it is important that they have access to communities that can support, empower and unlock opportunities for collaboration or growth.

Corporate partnerships can support this. By working together with organisations like Women's Agenda and initiatives in South Australia like [Women in Innovation](#) or agribusiness community [Women Together Learning](#), corporate partners can boost opportunities for women founders and leaders to make powerful connections that help them scale up.



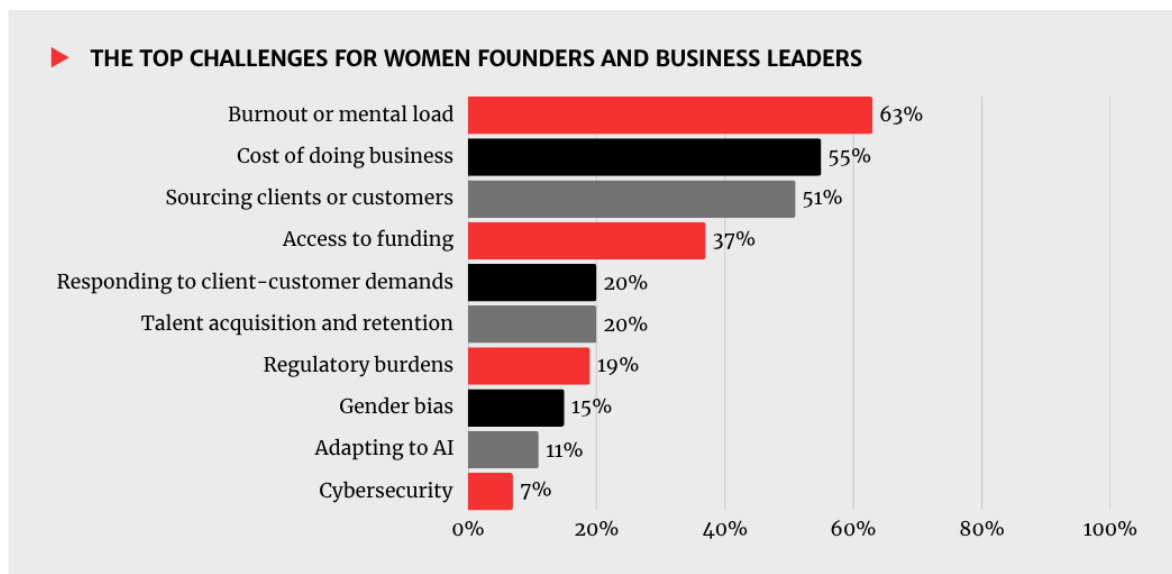
Ensure business owners don't get left behind with AI

Women's Agenda speaks regularly with leaders at the helm of this challenge. Ultimately, they emphasise that AI adoption is critical, and leaders should prioritise learning how to utilise it while taking proactive steps to empower their teams to embrace it.

As mentioned in the [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#), many women leaders wanting to address reservations around AI are taking innovative steps. Executives have shared how they use friendly hackathons or workshops that provide a safe space for staff to discuss how they're using AI, ask questions and build up their competency.

Top challenges for women business leaders and founders

In the face of many challenges, the leaders we heard from continue to grow their ventures and it's nothing short of inspiring.



[[2025 CommBank SMBc report](#)]

The challenge is for smaller business owners who are restrained with time and resources. It is important that they are offered training opportunities and support that allows them to capitalise on these new technologies.

Corporate partners and other institutional stakeholders can support these initiatives through sponsorships or partnering with women-led

businesses to drive AI education and team upskilling. Organisations like [Girl Geek Academy](#) or [Women in AI](#) are actively working to bridge the gender tech gap.

Working with organisations like to these to deliver technical workshops, events and other services to women SMB-leaders and owners in South Australia could make a difference.



Ideas for women founders from

Adelaide's roundtable

The sheer grit and tenacity of South Australian women in business was evident at the Adelaide roundtable. Despite societal and systemic barriers, these leaders were cutting through, growing their teams and scaling up. The impacts, however, were deeply felt and discussions on the day revealed the sacrifice many have had to make.

One of the entrepreneurs at the table, who brought with her more than two decades of experience, shared a powerful insight. She said building successful ventures has always been tough and especially so for women – but women founders and leaders carry a unique strength.

“Being a woman is a superpower and we should try and double down on that,” she said.

“Think about your point of difference.

“Certainly in some industries, being a woman is part of that, and you have a different perspective, so lean into that. It's not about pitting ourselves against the men. It's about saying this is what we are great at.”

Empower and stay connected

Founders and leaders at the Adelaide roundtable highlighted the importance of knowledge exchange in trusted circles. Some business owners said they have private chat groups on platforms like WhatsApp that keep them connected to a circle of close peers.

In groups like this, business leaders and entrepreneurs foster friendships, share ideas,

articles or podcast episodes that have been insightful or even encouragement for small wins along the way.

When building a business, a close network can be vital to help navigate the storms and difficult challenges that can come along the way. A trusted circle can also help spotlight issues early, provide encouragement and connection through what can be a very tough but exciting journey.

Leverage your time

Finding ways to better leverage time can be a powerful skill as a business leader balancing caring obligations and other commitments. Founders at the roundtable shared some of the ways they do this. Some used AI to plan basic day-to-day tasks or get through emails more efficiently.

One entrepreneur, who is also a parent, said she sometimes turns school pick-up and drop-offs into ‘learning time’ both for herself and her daughter. This could mean putting on a podcast on a topic or technology you want to better understand that can help improve business operations.

“I'm just trying to educate myself,” she said.

“I have a team of people too who can tell me, and I have agencies, and I have senior technology leaders in my business but I also have to make sure that I'm educating myself as best I can.

“I'll put my podcast on, and my daughter hates it, but I think she's learning something and so it's just trying to make the best of it.”

Proactively engage with the media

During the roundtable, participants reflected on how many media experts and thought leaders – especially in finance, business and tech – are male. Despite the wealth of experience, success and knowledge that exists among women running and leading businesses, the women in the room felt that “expert” representation was often male-skewed.

To shift this, *Women's Agenda* encouraged women leaders to pitch themselves as speaking talent on news and business shows, to contact journalists if they can offer insights on key stories being covered and to connect with editors who may be interested in written opinion pieces.

At the roundtable [The Visibility Project](#) founder Amy Springhall said she has been actively working to spotlight women experts, leaders and speakers. When working with women feeling anxious about putting themselves in the spotlight, she said she encourages them to switch their worry from ‘what will people think of me?’ to ‘who can I help by showing up?’.

Recognising our superpower as women

As business owner Sharon Zeev Poole so rightly pointed out in the [2025 CommBank SMBs report](#), the system needs to change so women's voices are not just heard for validation but actually respected.

And we as women need to keep knocking down barriers, lifting each other up and changing Australia's business landscape for the better.

“We need to redefine what leadership looks like as a society, it's not about pushing through silently without asking for more support,” said.

“It's about helping ourselves, while also helping others. If society wants us to be superheroes, it's time to support our superpowers.”





© Women's Agenda 2026
All rights reserved