



# Limiting Beliefs and Female-Owned Businesses

A study regarding the limiting beliefs of female entrepreneurs

Study conducted by: Lauren Apple, Catherine Brown, Liz Cortes, Julie Stroud, Lynn Tickner, and Dana Williams

With guidance from Ryan Brown, Ph.D., Managing Director for Measurement & Associate Director at The Doerr Institute for New Leaders, Rice University

Authors of this paper: Catherine Brown and Julie Stroud



**Female  
entrepreneurs  
limit their business  
success because  
they hold beliefs  
that lead to small  
actions instead of  
big ones.**

# Table Of Contents

- Table Of Contents .....03
- Abstract .....04
- The success of female-owned businesses comes down to personal beliefs .....05
  - In our study, we asked two main questions
- How we conducted this survey about limiting beliefs .....07
- The data about female business owners and their limiting beliefs .....08
  - The top five limiting beliefs of these female business owners were:
  - The top 5 interfering beliefs were:
- We discovered the obstacles female business owners navigate.....11
  - The belief-results cycle
  - The revenue roadblock
  - The confidence conundrum
- How limiting and interfering beliefs can be overcome .....16
  - Take one small step-and gain positive momentum.
  - Surround yourself with success to make what seems impossible possible.
  - Reframe your thoughts to achieve better outcomes.
- Three simple things you can do today to overcome limiting beliefs.....18
- Call to Action.....19
- Meet the Team .....20
- Addendum .....21



## Abstract

Many female entrepreneurs limit their business success because they hold beliefs that lead to small actions instead of big ones.

Rather than enjoying entrepreneurship, women report feeling unsuccessful, out of control, and not connected to their most important relationships.

Much has been studied and written over the years regarding gender differences, including income gap, wealth gap, career choices, and societal expectations of women and men in the workplace.

As female business owners themselves, the six researchers of this study wanted to explore the beliefs that lead to small actions rather than significant strides toward business growth. The idea was to uncover what gets in the way of female business owners reaching their full potential.

This study gathered insights from hundreds of female entrepreneurs who shared their personal beliefs about business growth.

The study revealed that female business owners hold beliefs that, in turn, affect the actions they take (or avoid taking) in their businesses. The study also showed correlations between women with more limiting beliefs and lower revenue.

Interestingly, even though female business owners could state what they believed were the next best action steps they should take, they also expressed doubt about taking them.

This paper will provide insights into the thoughts of female business owners, correlations, and findings, as well as recommendations to help female business owners achieve their business goals.

# The success of female-owned businesses comes down to personal beliefs.

Starting and growing a business takes confidence for both male and female business owners.

Yet data reveal that female entrepreneurs travel a different business trajectory than their male counterparts. On average, female-owned businesses are smaller than those owned by men.

Female-owned businesses are often influenced by:

- Industry and type of business– Women tend to own service provider businesses in smaller sectors with limited potential for scaling ([source](#)).
- Size of business– Female-owned businesses have fewer or no employees at all ([source](#)).
- Capital resources– Female business owners tend to start smaller and often avoid taking loans or other outside funding ([source](#)).

We, the six authors of this study, are all women with decades of experience as entrepreneurs. As such, we wanted to know what factors influence female business owners as they make decisions and take action. What attitudes and beliefs inform their decisions and actions and,

therefore, their business results?

We posited that female entrepreneurs limit their business success because they hold beliefs that lead to small actions instead of big ones.



**In our study, we asked two main questions:**

**1**

*“Do certain limiting beliefs about ourselves as female entrepreneurs predict whether we experience slow growth or stagnation?” and*

**2**

*“Do limiting beliefs cause female founders to take cautious action (or, in some cases, no action) to grow their businesses?”*

To test our theories, we created an anonymous survey to poll a statistically-significant\* sample of female founders about the role that beliefs play in their businesses. Further details on the types of limiting beliefs and exact methods for the study are included in the next section.

# How we conducted this survey about limiting beliefs

This study consisted of 31 statements that the participants were asked to score twice, plus four short-answer questions for the participants to answer freely, with no space or time limit.

Survey participants knew the survey was anonymous. We administered the survey via Survey Monkey, and a social scientist with a professional background in statistics interpreted the data.

To collect data, we polled women in our spheres of influence, including our clients, business associates, and women within our clients' networks. In addition, we invited other female entrepreneurs to share the study with their clients and followers.

This "snowball sampling" (data collected via spheres of influence) produced a less-diverse sample than if we had polled the general public.

That said, we received 357 responses to fulfill statistics best practices of statistically significant research.

To test our hypothesis, we asked participants to review 31 limiting-belief statements. The statements cover a broad range of belief types, including societal beliefs, beliefs regarding their respective community's expectations of them, beliefs about money, time, and the role that free will/destiny plays in their business actions.

The first round of questions regarding limiting beliefs asked participants to rank in order of severity on a 1-7 scale (with 1 meaning "not at all" and 7 meaning "very much") to what extent do you believe this belief statement to be true? We asked participants to identify the specific beliefs they believe to be true statements. We call these their "limiting beliefs."

The second round of questions asked participants to rank in order of severity on a 1-7 scale to what extent does this belief interfere with taking action as a business owner? (Again, 1 meant "not at all," and 7 meant "very much.") In other words, we asked participants to consider what beliefs are actual obstacles in their day-to-day decision-making and long-term business growth. We call these their "interfering beliefs."

Please see the Addendum to this white paper for the complete survey, including the list of 31 Limiting-Belief Statements.

# The data about female business owners and their limiting beliefs

The data provided insight into the thoughts of female business owners. The survey takers represented women from around the world and various industries.

Of those surveyed, 81% of the sample reported being white (non-Hispanic). However, comparing white respondents to everyone else in endorsement of limiting beliefs or inferences revealed no differences at all. The only difference observed was the belief that how you were raised directly influences the degree of difficulty with which you achieve business goals.

Regarding business revenue, 47% of respondents reported businesses with revenue under \$99,000 annually; 44% of respondents' businesses grossed between \$100,000-\$999,000 per year; and 9% reported owning businesses with annual revenues over \$1 million.

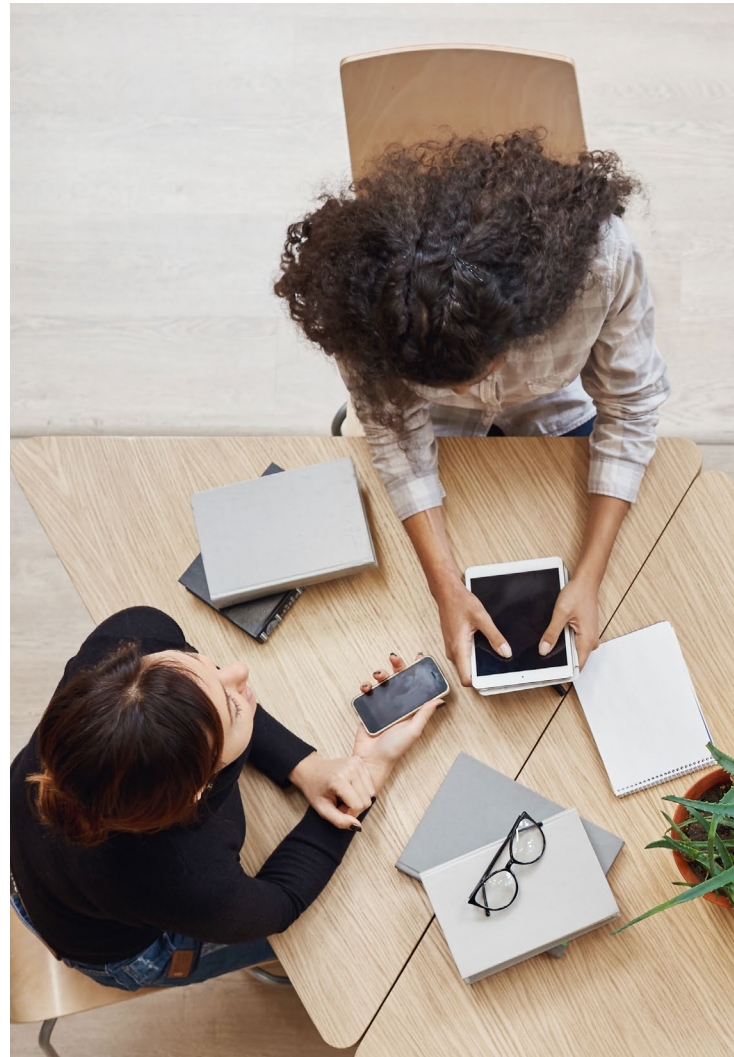




## The top five limiting beliefs of these female business owners were:

- ▶ If I haven't put in the time, I'm not going to get the return.
- ▶ I have never built a business bigger than the size I am now.
- ▶ There just isn't enough time in the day/week.
- ▶ I am afraid to raise outside capital to fund my business growth.
- ▶ I am the only person in my business who can do important tasks the right way.

Interestingly, these top limiting beliefs match the top five answers to the second question, "To what extent does each belief (below) interfere with your ability to take action in your business?"



*Interestingly, these top limiting beliefs match the top five answers for question two.*



### **The top five interfering beliefs were:**

- ▶ If I haven't put in the time, I'm not going to get the return.

---

- ▶ There just isn't enough time in the day/week.

---

- ▶ I have never built a business bigger than the size I am now.

---

- ▶ I am afraid to raise outside capital to fund my business growth.

---

- ▶ I am the only person in my business who can do important tasks the right way.

Study participants acknowledge that their limiting beliefs are affecting the action they take in their business and that their beliefs “interfere” with the necessary next steps toward business growth. Data from the open-ended questions in the survey reinforced the effects of the owners’ beliefs.

*Limiting beliefs affect action!*

# We discovered the obstacles female business owners navigate.

Our study demonstrates that the limiting beliefs held by female entrepreneurs affect their actions and business results.

We also found that interfering beliefs create a cyclical belief-results pattern, correlate with revenue earnings, and diminish confidence.

## The belief-results cycle

The limiting beliefs female entrepreneurs hold true are the same beliefs that keep them from taking immediate, decisive steps to grow their businesses.

Their concerns are informed by their perspectives on time, what it means to borrow money, delegation (or lack thereof), and their professional experience building larger businesses.

Collectively, the top five limiting beliefs create a cyclical problem. Female entrepreneurs believe there isn't enough time in the day or week to complete their work in addition to their personal responsibilities. However, they also believe that they—as business owners—are the only people who can do the most important work right now in their businesses. As a result, their productivity is adversely affected as the most important tasks are done slowly. This slower-paced, possibly even sporadic, work affects overall revenue growth.

Another cyclical problem arises around business finances. Respondents noted that they hesitate to raise outside capital, choosing to grow their businesses through self-funding or “boot-strapping.” Concerns about borrowing money increase the likelihood that founders are likely to have less capital to pay for additional staff. A smaller staff to share work reinforces the perceived problem that they don't have enough time to do the work only they, as founders, can do.

There are numerous iterations of the belief-results cycle that female entrepreneurs live out regularly. These two examples illustrate how beliefs impact actions and influence results.

## The revenue roadblock

Limiting beliefs appear to impact the revenue of female-owned businesses. We found that the most severe limiting beliefs were associated with the lowest revenue. This fact raises the question of whether the owners of smaller companies are small *because of* these beliefs.

Our study did not include a complete list of every reason why a female entrepreneur's business might not grow. Our study aimed to demonstrate whether female entrepreneurs' limiting beliefs affect business growth.

As highlighted in this paper's introduction (see Abstract), many differences exist between female-owned and male-owned businesses in the United States. We also know now that women with more self-reported limiting beliefs own smaller businesses (with lower revenue) than women with fewer limiting beliefs.

---

### Here is the breakdown of how revenue correlates with limiting beliefs.

---

Revenue	Severity of Limiting Beliefs	% of Respondents
\$99k and under	3.01	47%
\$100k-\$349k	2.90	34%
\$350k-\$999k	2.53	10%
\$1 million and above	2.68	9%

Statistical comparison across groups:  $F(3, 338) = 3.38, p = .019$ .

Our study suggests limiting beliefs impact a female business owner as she strives to reach \$99,000 in annual revenue. From there, limiting beliefs play less of a role once she surpasses six figures and beyond. Interestingly, once a business reaches \$1 million or more in annual revenue, participants reported holding slightly more limiting beliefs than business owners earning revenue in the \$350,000-999,000 range.

As a result of female founders knowing that it is less common for female-owned businesses to grow beyond \$1 million in revenue per year (a fact well-documented in the American media), we theorize that their confidence takes a direct hit. This observation creates an opportunity for further study.

The most strongly believed statements that correlate with revenue are shown below, with the first statement being the most strongly endorsed.

I am afraid to raise outside capital to fund my business growth.

I am the only person in my business who can do important tasks the right way.

I am not good enough with money to be the boss.

I don't know enough to grow my business.

Other people question my ability to lead because I am a woman.

*Our data suggest that the more a woman believes these statements, the lower her business's revenue.*

## The confidence conundrum

We asked study participants two open-ended assessment questions. Their responses reveal a confidence gap.

When asked about the challenges of building their businesses, the participants cited the lack of time, energy, emotional reserves, sales and marketing concerns, business ownership competence and confidence, and hiring staff in their top responses.

A second question invited participants to dream a little. The survey asked, "If nothing were standing in your way and you had an unlimited amount of money, resources, time, and confidence, what would you do differently to grow your business?"

Participants outlined in great detail the exact steps they would take if they knew they couldn't fail. Their answers fell into the following categories:

- Hiring sales and/or marketing consultants
- Hiring a business or executive coach
- Purchasing space or equipment
- Investing in self with conferences, travel, and other professional development
- Hiring other staff members (various roles)



The data reveal that these female business owners think about growth actions regularly but often fail to execute them. Their responses to both the 31 belief questions and the open-ended questions indicate they feel fearful and lack confidence.

## Three recurring limiting beliefs

In studying our data, we grouped responses into three themes. Female business owners had three main and recurring limiting beliefs:

**1**

**I am not enough to be successful**

(e.g., I don't know enough, I don't have enough experience).

**2**

**I am not in control of my future**

(e.g., I can't charge enough, I don't know where my next revenue is coming from, there isn't enough time in the day).

**3**

**I am not able to remain connected to others as I grow**

(e.g., I worry my business success will complicate family relationships, I wonder if my confidence is perceived as bossy).

These thoughts frustrate ambitious women and are likely to thwart their success. This pattern is also known as positive-negative reinforcement.

For example, a female entrepreneur might think, "I want to work with an executive coach to reach my peak performance. Then I can achieve so many things in my business—and on my bucket list!"

However, interfering beliefs soon arise in her thoughts, serving as a sort of punishment. "If I did that, would my family recognize me any longer? Who do I think I am? Can I really write a book and speak from the stage?"

These negative thoughts and back-and-forth inner dialog discourage her aspirational behavior.

It takes enormous confidence to launch a business and even greater confidence to grow a business. This internal chatter creates confidence issues, which can curtail business growth and personal potential.

# How limiting and interfering beliefs can be overcome

This study confirms that personal beliefs hinder the growth of female entrepreneurs. Our findings align with truths and theories in social science.

The identity decision-making model made popular by James March in his book “Primer on Decision-Making: How Decisions Happen,” asserts that people make decisions based on their perception of themselves. Rather than a purely factual analysis informed by weighing the pros/cons and risks/benefits, identity-based decisions are made from the purview of personal beliefs and values.

Identity decision-making is tricky to reconcile because one may think they are making entirely rational choices. But in reality, those decisions are heavily influenced by what they believe is acceptable or unacceptable.

Identity decision-making can form an interesting feedback loop. Identity defines the decisions we make, which informs the actions we take. In turn, those actions are pivotal in defining our lives. The cycle repeats every time we allow our perceptions to influence the next set of decisions we make.

For better or worse, identity influences everyday decisions and actions.

So, how can we change our personal identity? The next point of taking action and the principles of behavior change influence personal identity.

## **Take one small step—and gain positive momentum.**

When confusion or doubt sets in, progress slows or even comes to a screeching halt. However, taking one small action—like simply completing the most mundane task on your to-do list—can result in a quick win and create momentum.

Psychological momentum occurs when there is a change in thoughts, feelings, physiology, or behavior. This momentum creates a shift in perception which releases neurochemicals and can enhance performance and outcomes.

As James Clear explains in his best-selling book “Atomic Habits,” the Habit Loop includes triggers that encourage positive behavior and rewards for accomplishing the behavior. Triggers encourage taking action, and rewards make it desirable.

Clear asserts that our behaviors shape our identity. We create the lives we want to live when we regularly engage in positive behaviors. This ongoing cycle of positive steps generates momentum.





### **Surround yourself with success to make what seems impossible possible.**

According to what social psychologists call the “proximity effect,” we become most like the five people around us. Thereby, in theory, if we surround ourselves with others who are successful, we, too, will become successful.

Behavior change psychology asserts that our surroundings condition us. Making a few meaningful changes in your environment is essential to create a new habit. For instance, if you want to wake up earlier, moving the alarm clock to the other side of the room is a simple change to establish a new positive habit.

To that end, if you want to achieve a certain level of success in business (and break a revenue roadblock), spend time with successful entrepreneurs. The people we surround ourselves with can encourage us, teach us, cause us to think differently, and influence us to behave differently.

### **Reframe your thoughts to achieve better outcomes.**

Thought reframing is a powerful tool for changing thoughts and behaviors. An easy-to-remember technique is replacing limiting beliefs with liberating truths. Best-selling author and business coach Michael Hyatt writes about the concept in his books “Your Best Year Ever” and “Free to Focus.”

This practice is a common element of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The theory is that changing your thoughts changes your point of view, which can change your feelings and behavior.

CBT can help identify limiting beliefs and replace them with a new belief or a liberating truth. Over time, this can change a person’s viewpoint, feelings, and personal outcomes.

Reframing your thoughts can be a difficult task on your own because personal bias shades our viewpoint. Identifying our limiting thoughts and finding another way is like seeing the forest for the trees and may be best accomplished with the help of a therapist, mentor, coach, or consultant.

# Three simple things you can do today to overcome limiting beliefs

---

Female entrepreneurs can achieve their desired success by identifying and overcoming their limiting beliefs. Here are three specific things you can do:



Break the belief-results cycle by taking action. Trust your intuition and take the next right step to unlock the hold of a limiting belief.

Engage in a project that moves your business forward, and you will begin to see yourself differently. New people, new goals, and new projects change your perspective—and your results.



Surpass a revenue roadblock by surrounding yourself with successful entrepreneurs. Join a community of professional women who are performing at an aspirational level.

Observing and learning from high-achieving female business owners can help normalize the revenue goal you want to reach.



Abolish the confidence conundrum by replacing limiting beliefs with liberating truths. Engage in coaching or mentorship conversations to discover your limiting beliefs, consider that person's suggestions and perspectives, and learn to reframe your thoughts. Changing your thoughts and your behavior takes time.

Achieving success does not happen by luck, nor does it happen as a one-woman wonder. Success in business often occurs as a result of the talent and contributions of many wise advisors. Successful entrepreneurs ask for help and receive guidance.

# Call to Action

An isolated, self-paced, do-it-yourself approach to growing a business can prevent you from going further faster and limit your earning potential. Engage in the services of a coach or consultant who challenges you and can guide you toward your ultimate success.

With the guidance of a coach or consultant, you can:

- Break the belief-results cycle by taking the right next step today.
- Surpass a revenue roadblock by surrounding yourself with high-achievers to achieve your desired success.
- Abolish the confidence conundrum by reframing thoughts and gaining a fresh perspective with the help of a trusted guide.

*You can achieve your business ideals.*

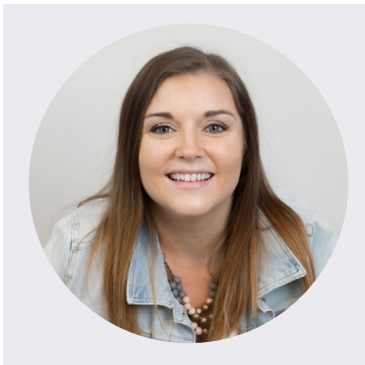
As the saying goes, a thousand-mile journey begins with one small step. Take the small step today of reaching out to a coach or consultant who can guide you to your desired success.

Note:

A “statistically significant” result is a scientific term that means an outcome that is not attributed to chance. If your hypothesis is true, then having a larger sample size is extremely unlikely to change the outcome of your findings. In our case, polling even more female entrepreneurs would probably produce the same top five limiting beliefs.

# Meet the Team

---



**LAUREN APPLE**  
FOUNDER OF  
[SYSTEMS TO SCALE](#)



**CATHERINE BROWN**  
FOUNDER OF  
[THE GOOD HUMANS  
GROWTH NETWORK](#)



**LIZ CORTES**  
FOUNDER OF  
[REBELFISH LOCAL](#)



**JULIE STROUD**  
FOUNDER OF  
[BRIGHTBRAND](#)



**LYNN TICKNER**  
FOUNDER OF  
[INK & KEY](#)



**DANA WILLIAMS**  
FOUNDER OF  
[DANA WILLIAMS  
CONSULTING](#)

# Addendum

## Study on Limiting Beliefs of Female Entrepreneurs

Survey questionnaire written by Lauren Apple, Catherine Brown, Liz Cortes, Julie Stroud, Lynn Tickner, and Dana Williams with guidance by Ryan Brown, Ph.D.

### Demographics

1. This category describes the majority of my time in my work week: (choose 1)
  - A. Startup- You're getting ready to launch (or have launched) a virtual or brick and mortar business. You're just getting started.
  - B. Growth- Your business is thriving and growing. This stage means increased revenue and customers. There's a growing need for repeatable, scalable processes.
  - C. Expansion- Your business is in a new season of growth with new products and revenue streams.
  - D. Established- Maturity stage. Your initial vision is successfully realized and you're generating predictable, sustainable revenue.
  - E. Corporate- You're part of running a large-scale business with over 500 employees, a board of directors, and shareholders.
  - F. Other (please explain)

**2.** As I look to the next 12 months, I would like to: (You may choose more than 1)

- A. Launch a new business.
- B. Focus my energy on growing my current business.
- C. Take big steps to launch new products and revenue streams.
- D. Leave my 9-5 and be self-employed.
- E. Retire from corporate.
- F. Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

**3.** Your company's annual revenue

- A. Under \$99,000
- B. \$100,000- \$349,000
- C. \$350,000- \$749,000
- D. \$750,000- \$999,000
- E. \$1 million- \$1.9 million
- F. \$2 million- \$9.9 million
- G. \$10 million or more

**4. Geographic Location: (Primary Residence)A.Launch a new business.**

United States

Australia

Canada

France

Germany

Mexico

Middle East/North Africa

New Zealand

South Asia (India, Pakistan)

Southeast Asia

Spain

United Kingdom

Any other European country

Any other African country

Any South American country

Other (open text )

**5. Industry (For your primary work)**

United States

Agriculture

Coaching/Consulting

Construction

Direct Sales

Education

Energy

Entertainment/Media

Financial

Food

Healthcare

Hospitality

Legal

Manufacturing

Marketing/Advertising

Medical

Nonprofit (non-religious)

Nonprofit (religious)

Real Estate

Retail/Consumer

Sports

Technology

Transportation

Other (open text)



**6.** Are you a

Man

Woman

Prefer Not to Say

**7.** Age (open text)

**8.** Race and Ethnicity (Choose One)A. Under \$99,000

Asian

Black

Hispanic/LatinX

Native American

North African or Middle Eastern

Pacific Islander

White (non-Hispanic/LatinX)

Other (please specify)

## Survey Questions:

**Question 1)** To what extent do you believe this statement to be true? (1= Not at all 7= Very Much) add 1 through 31

**Question 2)** To what extent does this belief interfere with you taking action in your business as an entrepreneur? (1= Not at all 7= Very Much) add 1 through 31

1. I don't know enough to grow my business.
2. I'm not smart enough to be in charge.
3. I have trouble choosing the right team.
4. I don't have enough experience managing other people.
5. My health problems hold me back.
6. I do not have the right personal habits to be successful.
7. I am unclear about the value I bring to the workplace.
8. I don't know what my purpose is in the world.
9. I've never built a business bigger than the size I am now.
10. I can't be trusted because I tend to make bad decisions.
11. There is too much competition in my field to grow bigger.
12. I am the only person in my business who can do important tasks the right way.
13. I can't handle massive success.
14. My success is predetermined by God/The Universe/Fate.
15. I am unsure how to brand myself/my business effectively.

16. I'm not good enough with money to be the boss.
17. I can't charge enough to grow my business to the next level.
18. There is a finite amount of money in the world.
19. I am afraid to raise outside capital to fund my business growth.
20. There just isn't enough time in a day/week.
21. It is going to take too long to train additional staff.
22. If I haven't put in the time, I'm not going to get the return.
23. I'm too old to build something significant now.
24. I have to choose between being a successful business leader or having the family role I want.
25. I worry my business success will complicate family relationships.
26. I am afraid I might outgrow friendships as my success grows.
27. I wonder if my confidence is perceived by others as bossy.
28. I think that business success is more socially acceptable for men than for women.
29. It is more socially acceptable for women to be a VP instead of CEO.
30. My family will expect financial support if I am more successful.
31. Other people question my abilities to lead because I am a woman.

3. To what extent do you feel that the way you were raised (e.g., your values, habits, family patterns) make your business goals difficult to achieve?

1- Not at all

7- Very much

4. What is your biggest challenge as you build your business?

(Open text)

5. If nothing were standing in your way and you had an unlimited amount of money, resources, time, and confidence, what would you do differently to grow your business?

(Open text)

6. To what extent have you reached the level of success in your business that you aspire to?

1- I'm very far from where I aspire to be.

7- I have achieved exactly what I wanted to achieve.

# **Limiting Beliefs and Female-Owned Businesses**

A study regarding the limiting beliefs of female entrepreneurs