

Assessing Impact of a Mandela Washington Fellowship Institute for African Entrepreneurs

A. J. Smith¹, M. C. Edwards², C. E. Watters³, M. W. Rutherford⁴

Abstract

The development of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been slow compared to the rest of the world, and a lack of investment in human capital development emerges as a prevalent reason. Oklahoma State University provided a six-week-long entrepreneurship education program (EEP) for participants from SSA; many had agricultural or food businesses. Approaches to entrepreneurship education is a well-debated topic in the literature, including how best to evaluate such. We conducted a study in which 12 entrepreneurs were interviewed about nine months after the program's end. Transcripts were analyzed using Epoche, horizontalization, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Themes, sub-themes, and an essence emerged. The themes were improvements, changes, and challenges to their business models; self-improvement and empowerment; and social change. Building the capacity of socially responsible entrepreneurs for a new Africa was the phenomenon's essence. Future research should assess the impact of business knowledge attainment on the long-term success of entrepreneurs and identify learning experiences motivating them to practice social entrepreneurship. EEPs should stress rigor and an ethos of accomplishment, conduct site visits, and provide opportunities for community service. Interventions to negate the marginalization frequently experienced by women entrepreneurs in developing contexts are also discussed.

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1. Alexander J. Smith, Global Category Manager, Fresenius Medical Care North America, 920 Winter Street, Waltham, MA 02451-1457, alex.smith@freseniusmedicalcare.com,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8877-4814>
 2. M. Craig Edwards, Professor of Agricultural Education, Ferguson College of Agriculture, Oklahoma State University, 448 Agriculture Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, craig.edwards@okstate.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4436-4450>
 3. Craig E. Watters, Associate Professor of Professional Practice, Spears School of Business, Oklahoma State University, 343 Business Building, Stillwater, OK 74078, craig.watters@okstate.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4386-1818>
 4. Matthew W. Rutherford, Professor of Entrepreneurship, Spears School of Business, Oklahoma State University, 463 Business Building, Stillwater, OK 74078, matthew.rutherford@okstate.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1274-6702>

Introduction and Problem Statement

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is part of the youngest, poorest, and fastest-growing continent. As scholars study why its development has been halting and slow, a lack of investment in human capital emerges as a prevalent reason (Juma, 2011). Regarding agriculture, resources supporting technological innovations that do not fit SSA's needs could be invested in other ways that may optimize the sector's efficiency and profitability (Toenniessen et al., 2008), such as in its human capital. Oklahoma State University was awarded funding for a six-week-long entrepreneurship education program (EEP), i.e., a Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF) Institute, during 2017. The U.S. Agency for International Development sponsors the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), which is

. . . investing in an emerging generation of young African leaders by committing resources to enhance leadership skills, invigorate entrepreneurship, and connect young African leaders with one another, counterparts in the United States, and other innovative leaders in both private and public sectors. ("Young African leader", n.d., para. 3)

The MWF is *the flagship program of YALI* and occurs through U.S.-based MWF Institutes.

Our MWF Institute provided training for 25 entrepreneurs (i.e., Fellows) from 17 SSA countries that included 13 males and 12 females. Many were agricultural producers or food purveyors. They experienced a curriculum of entrepreneurship topics, enterprise shadowing opportunities, networking encounters, and cross-cultural activities. Whether they had thriving businesses or small, struggling startups, the MWF Institute sought to assist in furthering their entrepreneurial ventures and expose them to business opportunities to pursue in the future. Although approaches to entrepreneurship education are well-debated topics in the literature, how to best evaluate such programs remains an open question, making the MWF Institute a phenomenon worthy of study (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, an inquiry was needed to assess the MWF Institute's impact after its participants had returned home. Of note, the same number of women as men were included in this inquiry due to their frequent underrepresentation in similar studies and often unfounded marginalization when considering how to best capacitate aspiring entrepreneurs, including those in the agriculture and food sectors (Dancer & Hossain, 2018; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011; Naved, 1994).

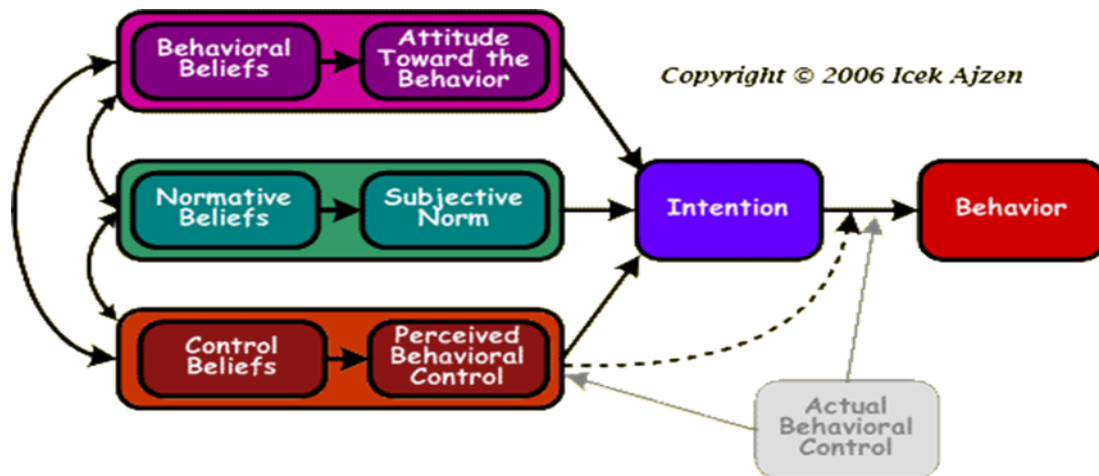
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The MWF Institute was designed to develop and improve the participants' entrepreneurial proficiency by providing training in financing, business planning and management, creativity, networking opportunities, and technical skills, such as grant proposal writing, among a plethora of other topics. The providers assumed that the Fellows' knowledge and skills about entrepreneurship could be improved; hence, the study's conceptual framework was human capital theory (Becker, 1994; Schultz, 1961; Welch, 1975). The premise that participants would enhance their entrepreneurial abilities by adopting new attitudes, acquiring learning that presaged new behaviors, and increasing their perceived behavioral control to exercise the actions necessary to achieve desired outcomes was supported by Ajzen's (1991) theory of

planned behavior (see Figure 1). These well-known frameworks underpinned our approach to the study, including interpretation of findings and proffering of conclusions and recommendations.

Figure 1

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (ToPB)



Note: Adapted from "The Theory of Planned Behavior," by I. Ajzen, 1991, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), p. 182. Copyright 1991 by Academia Press, Inc.

Purpose

We sought to assess the impact an EEP, in this case a MWF Institute, had on selected Fellows regarding how they practiced entrepreneurship in new ways after returning to their home countries. Examining the impacts of an EEP could provide findings about improving approaches to business development (Henry et al., 2005a, 2005b) by entrepreneurs from SSA and elsewhere, especially when the training transpires in a cross-cultural setting (Taylor et al., 2020). Exploring a cultural immersion experience such as a MWF Institute that targeted entrepreneurs may also yield improved understanding of their attitudes on citizenship, community membership, and community service (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Methods

We used qualitative methods to conduct a phenomenological study. Seymour (2006) concluded that phenomenology is a useful tool to analyze entrepreneurship because entrepreneurs exercise behaviors in response to the opportunities they recognize but doing that is complicated due to the broad spectrum of human decision-making. Moustakas' (1994) nine principles of transcendental phenomenology guided the study. Along with Moustakas' (1994) principles, the investigators also followed Tracy's (2010) indicators of high-quality qualitative research to increase the likelihood of a thorough, rigorous, and ethical investigation.

Maximal variation sampling (Creswell & Clark, 2017) captured a diverse set of perceptions. The Fellows interviewed included six men and six women, each from one of 12 SSA nations. They were interviewed via online technologies about nine months after the program's end; interviews lasted from approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim to accurately reflect what was discussed. After completing the transcriptions, participants were sent their transcripts via electronic mail attachments to verify the accuracy of such, i.e., *member checking* was conducted. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), *member checking* is a process that shifts accountability regarding the accuracy of findings from the researcher to the participants and increases credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Tracy, 2010). We highlighted sections of the transcripts for which clarifications were needed. One Fellow responded with major changes, four replied with minor changes, and seven did not provide any modifications. The transcripts were analyzed through the procedures described by Moustakas (1994): *Epoche*, the practice of *bracketing*, i.e., researchers self-identify their biases; *horizontalization*, whereby researchers organize significant statements from the interviews with all having equal value; *phenomenological reduction*, the creation of themes from the interviewees' quotes; and *imaginative variation*, which tested assumptions supporting the thematic organization. NVivo 12 was also used as an organizational tool during data analysis.

The Fellows interviewed ranged from 27 to 35 years of age ($M = 30.25$). Four each, respectively, were from nations in the eastern, southern, and western regions of the African continent, and eight had agricultural or food purveyance enterprises.

Researchers' Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a validity procedure by which researchers "self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, and biases" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127), so to not mislead readers about their views and to increase the likelihood of eliminating biases from a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I am a British immigrant who became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2016. I had no agricultural experience as a youth, nor did I have any direct interactions with entrepreneurship. I earned an undergraduate degree in political science and economics and was a master of science degree student in international agriculture with an emphasis on agricultural economics during the study. I was a paid member of the MWF Institute's staff and participated in many of the Fellows' learning experiences and cultural interactions. I forged friendships with the Fellows and maintained ongoing relationships through social media. Therefore, I formed opinions and drew conclusions about the fellowship experience. By *bracketing* my thoughts (Moustakas, 1994), I noted my biases and preconceived notions about the interviewees and reflected on such. The other researchers are faculty members at Oklahoma State University—one in the college of agriculture and two in the school of business, working in agricultural education and entrepreneurship, respectively. Two directed the MWF Institute and had traveled to SSA for entrepreneurship projects.

Findings

Thirty-one categories or codes, four major themes, and seven sub-themes emerged during data analysis; three of the themes and all sub-themes are reported below. The theme “Lessons Learned from Fellow Africans” was not shared here but is detailed in the study’s parent thesis (Smith, 2018). Such were synthesized from and are representative of Fellows’ quotes. To emerge as a theme, the ideas or concepts must have been *prevalent* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in the 12 transcribed interviews.

Theme 1: Improvements, Changes, and Challenges to Their Business Models

The theme was explicated through three sub-themes. *Actualization*, including intentions (Ajzen, 1991), was arrived at as a sub-theme based on the Fellows’ discussions of the business-related changes they implemented after returning home. For instance, Fellow 10 discussed a change to their enterprise due to adjusting the production process: “So now we are, we are producing the fertilizer and packaging for which is dry and can [be] put in bags and we can sell it whenever we want.” Fellow 6, a baker, shared changes they made after returning home: “I have introduced about six new products. Interestingly, I already have cakes. I have rebranded, I have a new logo. And I am building a kitchen right now.” On the contrary, two of the Fellows interviewed had abandoned their entrepreneurial ventures after returning home.

Many Fellows also expressed ideas they had not yet set in motion or reported business skills they perceived possessing because of their MWF Institute experiences that remained unrealized. Fellow 7 described how they *planned* to pursue new business opportunities in the future: “They [soap machines] are expensive. . . . around \$10,000 USD. . . . Oh no, I’m not waiting. . . . when I came [home] the business picked up. Meaning, I’m saving money for this.”

Impact of the Fellows’ *classroom learning* experiences was another sub-theme that emerged. Their classroom takeaways varied but were clearly traced back, and sometimes the entrepreneurs even named specific lectures, such as what Fellow 9 shared:

[I]t somehow [was] different from what I knew as entrepreneurship because um I didn’t learn business from school. . . . and what I knew about business was only having a product [and] how to sell the product . . . so [during] the [MWF] Institute, I learned more about business theories from bright teachers. . . . I met motivated entrepreneurs who really honed my skills.

Fellow 1 explained how they learned about creating a business plan:

Well, we learned about the business plan . . . They showed step by step the amount [of money] that you are going to use for your business. . . . It was a shock, because we, we tend to see things [as] very difficult.

Fellow 9 described importance of the MWF Institute’s customer service lessons:

We had a session about customer care while in Oklahoma. I really appreciated that. . . . I [have] tried to train them [my employees] about how we can handle, or we can manage with our customer[s]

The Fellows also discussed ways to manage costs, such as reducing production expenses or by acquiring partners. Fellow 8 pointed to a lecture on this subject:

. . . the lesson about . . . bootstrapping, it is much more closely [to the] African environment because, literally, when you decide to be an entrepreneur or to be involved in a company to realize something like an idea, you don't have anything to rely on. You need [to] know how to, to begin with what you have.

Site visits were the Fellows' opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills in their specific sectors and to interact with U.S. professionals. They observed practices that worked in Oklahoma and formed opinions about such as well as noted ideas, including the recognition of new markets. Fellow 7 discussed the wide range of businesses they saw: "I discovered the[re are a] lot of business opportunities out here. One, I have started making liquid soap. . . . With my girls, we make it here and we, we give out to offices . . . for cleaning their room."

For many Fellows, the main takeaway of the site visits or enterprise shadowing experiences was gaining technical and industry knowledge that could be applied to their businesses. Fellow 5 said: "The first thing, he mixed his own poultry feed. In [country], like in the entire country, nobody makes their own poultry feed. That was amazing for me." Fellow 11 explained their impression after being asked to reflect on a site visit experience:

. . . The first one was the visit we had at that goat institute. . . . They have a way of making fertilizers very quickly, using the the dead animal parts. So that's things I learn[ed] and the[y are] currently using it to boost up the nitrogen content.

Several Fellows also mentioned the concept of *sustainability*. It was repeatedly mentioned as having an enterprise that is long-lasting and endures over time. Fellow 5's reaction to visiting a poultry farm depicted their aspirations regarding this form of sustainability:

Also, it was like a third generation farm. And I realized that this is doable, I can start to see [that] my kids can run with it [and] that the[ir] kids can run with it. So, I'm setting the foundation and building it up, and by God's Grace my children will benefit from it, and their children's children.

Fellow 2 returned several times to the importance of sustainability, what it meant to them coming from Africa, and how impressed he was after a particular site visit:

. . . sustainability is almost non-existent in [country]. There is hardly . . . a company that has lasted a single generation, so after the first 10 years everything begins to go down. . . . entrepreneurs do not always think about sustainability. Now that actually inspires me, to [have] see[n] a man who has done the same thing for over 40 years, and . . . his ambition is still rowing.

Theme 2: Self-Improvement and Empowerment

The Fellows also described changes within themselves. These changes were manifested by two sub-themes—*relational*, concerning or considering other people, and the Fellows' *perceived behavioral control*. *Relational* included views shared about how they treated people or how others treated them, including being a better person and was based mostly on interactions with others. Fellow 5 described becoming a better person by stressing *accountability*:

. . . accountability for myself and if I was told I would have to do a certain task, I, I made sure that I started to learn . . . it. It's important as an entrepreneur and as a leader, and if you are starting something then you need to get it done on time, so that[s] it; some of the lessons that I took away from the [MWF] Institute.

Further, the Fellows discussed their views regarding some of the U.S. participants with whom they interacted and whether relationships with them were continuing. Fellow 2 reflected on their feelings about a relationship with one of the MWF Institute's staff members:

. . . Maybe I, maybe I didn't say thank you enough to everybody at the [MWF] Institute, especially, especially [a staff member] who I call my father. In Africa, when you say someone is your father, I mean that means a lot. And I mean it actually, I say this from my heart of hearts, because it's a father that gives someone the ability to make you better, while he-he is hard enough to stay on your case, an[d] he's also soft enough and compassionate enough.

Another concept mentioned by many Fellows was *leadership*, which was a program focus. The Fellows completed a Leadership Development Plan during the MWF Institute. Fellow 6 observed how the MWF Institute's leadership development programming shaped their view on leaders:

We took a course in leadership, especially servant leadership. It is, it's amazing because our understanding of leadership is someone that was handling a position rather than someone who is making a decision or someone who is impacting [a situation]. I always thought a leader is like a boss or something, but suddenly it's not. Leadership is defined by who we are and what we do.

Fellow 10 articulated their former view of leadership and how that changed:

The leadership part, uh, seriously, before I come [to the MWF Institute] I didn't [really understand the concept]. I always thought that a leader is someone in politics and I don't like politics too much because maybe because of our history. But I realize[d] that I am a leader . . . [and] the need to be [one].

The Fellows also described new behaviors they acquired; one was timeliness or punctuality. The MWF Institute had a very regimented schedule, and cultural differences about time were evident. Changing views on the importance of timeliness stood out for some. Fellow 12 was asked if the MWF Institute changed their views on entrepreneurship, a rather macro question about how they viewed doing business overall, but they replied with a takeaway stressing time management:

. . . in fact it introduced two very important things, time and scale. . . when I came back home [from] and when I got to the [MWF] Institute, I, my sense of time was a little uh off. . . . But then essentially, how I conduct my business now, . . . [my] sense of time is actually almost [that of a] perfectionist.

Fellow 9 also noted the emphasis on timeliness or *keeping time* and how that surprised them:

Yes, I learned much about, I learned much about time [management]. . . . That is, uh a big lesson I had as a person there, in Oklahoma. We had to respect time, to be on time, every time. That was not . . . in my habit [before the MWF Institute].

Perceived behavioral control were views presented by the Fellows that focused mainly on internal processes (Ajzen, 1991; see Figure 1) and less on external actors, such as the topic of *creativity*. Though most Fellows did not describe implementing their creativity, many mentioned new markets and examples of *opportunity recognition* within the aims of improving their businesses. Fellow 6, however, reflected on *creativity* by name when they said: “I think one of the most interesting topics that I experienced during the fellowship was in creative thinking. I think that really helped me in thinking differently, outside of the box.”

Fellow 4 implied creativity and innovation when explaining their view:

Um, yes, it did. It did because constantly we were made to think, okay ‘what can we do, what should we do more, what can we do?’ and not waste resources. I thought okay, I don’t need to lose this. What should I do [with this knowledge]?

Another illustration of the Fellows’ *perceived behavioral control* (Ajzen 1991) was *empowerment*, or how they saw themselves as more empowered because of the MWF Institute. Fellow 1 said: “. . . I always doubted my skills, I said ‘okay, I have skills, but I don’t trust my skills 100%.’ And so the fellowship made me stronger, in a way that now I believe more in what I do.”

Many Fellows highlighted events that happened during the MWF Institute, especially the high-ropes challenge course they experienced. Fellow 6 elaborated on how that affected them:

. . . I never thought I could do it. . . . I saw, myself in a different light [afterward] because I, you know, I never talk about myself as someone who takes responsibility, someone who can make tough decisions. I was always relying on [other] people, I was always trying to get validation from people around me before making the decisions. But during the fellowship, I was making decisions by myself, and when I came back home . . . I didn’t need validation from people to run my business. . . . I was able to become stronger in making decisions

Theme 3: Social Change

The Fellows shared views on differences between their home countries and what they experienced during the MWF Institute. A sub-theme within the theme of *social change* was *cultural observations, including differences*. These were observations about Oklahoma and Stillwater community and reflection on their home locales. The sub-theme had more references than others, so it was clearly a key takeaway. Fellow 10 reflected on the differences by highlighting an observation that caused them to consider how their community represents and celebrates itself:

When I was in Oklahoma, it was relayed, orange. Orange, you go in supermarket you buy a bottle of Oklahoma State University [water]. You can buy the cup of Oklahoma

State University; it's like its [own] local community. In my country, we cannot find it. We cannot even find a t-shirt of my university and it's the biggest one.

Fellow 9 shared how his community reacts to the business success of others:

. . . here, if you open something or you bring, you bring a kind of new product in the market, people won't buy it from you, because they would consider that if they buy from you, they will be enriching you.

The Fellows expressed perceptions of their communities' views on not only agriculture but also regarding other industries they saw as having certain stigmas surrounding them. Fellow 8 described the attitudes that many people in their nation have toward agriculture:

. . . because in [country] people think that when you [are] an, an agripreneur or a farmer you don't have anything to do in your life. So, agriculture in [country] or in Africa . . . [involves] people who have resigned [from their jobs] or we don't have anything [else] to do in society.

Fellow 6 described similar attitudes about food purveying in their nation:

. . . people think that vocational skill is for dropouts. So me being a baker, people still think, 'oh my gosh, why are you baking?' . . . But I never listened to that, I continued to do it.

Marginalization was another topic raised, especially as based on gender. Fellow 5 said:

. . . to actually acquire land, they would want to know who's child I belong to [my parents], . . . they would need a male representative with me. And these are some of the things that make it very difficult for women in [country], to be able to, to grow, for their businesses to thrive, because it's easier for a man to get these sorts of things, But for women, there's so many hurdles that you have to jump over for you to actually [receive] the same resources a man would easily get.

Fellow 3 lamented the lack of effort devoted to overcome the marginalization of women:

We have a very high number of single mothers here in [country]. . . . and usually they are working the farm, not with their kids, and nobody takes care of those kids, and nobody is saying anything, the government is not looking after anyone.

Fellow 6 also assessed the realities of being a woman in their nation:

. . . the bank would ask us for collateral, and for the most part women don't have this because they don't have access to own properties, [or] they have access to properties, but they don't have the liberty to build [on] them. You know, they can have land to farm on because the land is owned by their father or . . . by the husband but they don't own the land. The land documents are not available to them, and if they don't [have such], then they cannot gain access to loans.

The Fellows also described a form of *reciprocity* between the community and entrepreneur, a *duty* that an entrepreneur has to their community and vice versa. Fellow 2 described this relationship as central to the meaning of entrepreneurship:

But for me, entrepreneurship is not just about selling something, or making money; entrepreneurship is about solving problems. So an entrepreneur is that individual who sees or identifies certain problems in his community or in the society, and then tries to provide a solution to that problem. And then, in the process of doing this, is able to sell the solution and make money out of it.

And Fellow 7 added: “It [the MWF Institute] has helped me understand the importance to listening to my community.” Fellow 3 reflected on Stillwater’s Habitat for Humanity’s work: “I think my mission to the Fellowship was to go there and see an example and learn from it and come home and see how I can implement it.” The sub-theme *other* included two codes that did not fit readily elsewhere but also related to social entrepreneurship.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

The themes and sub-themes derived from the Fellows’ interviews about their experiences as participants in Oklahoma State University’s 2017 MWF Institute led us to form an understanding of the phenomenon. The phenomenon’s *essence* is the following: *Building the capacity of socially responsible entrepreneurs for a new Africa*. This characterization of the study’s essence also supported assertions and substantiations that aligned with the larger study’s research questions (see Smith, 2018, pp. 115–119).

The Fellows expressed that the MWF Institute experience made a difference in their business skills, how they practiced business, and the outcomes of their enterprises after returning home. They reported a wide variety of different practices and results and reflected on changes to their enterprises, including modifications to production processes, inputs, outputs, and business models. However, two of the 12 Fellows discontinued the ventures they had operated before participating in the MWF Institute.

Our findings can inform the programming of similar EEPs. We recommend that providers of EEPs stress rigor coupled with an ethos of accomplishment, which is likely to further enhance the participants’ perceptions of self-improvement, empowerment, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Future research should assess the impact that formal training in business knowledge has on the decision making, i.e., actualized behaviors (Ajzen, 1991) and the long-term success of entrepreneurs who participate in EEPs due to their expansion of human capital (Becker, 1994; Schultz, 1961; Welch, 1975). Longitudinal studies—using both quantitative and interpretive measures and methods—could be an appropriate investigatory approach.

The funder of MWF Institutes and organizations with similar objectives should insist that women be equally represented among their participants. However, if entrepreneurial education is to reach its full potential for female participants, additional interventions may be needed, especially regarding land ownership and access to credit to establish and expand their business ventures (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011). Without such, society’s return on its investment in the Fellows’ human capital through EEPs will go unfulfilled (Becker, 1994; Schultz, 1961; Welch, 1975).

Those most in need of assistance too frequently receive it least, last, or never. As such, constraints that perpetuate the historical marginalization of women are not new and often are imbued with and buoyed by subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991), which may foment outright and institutionalized discrimination while interfering with their development of perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; see Figure 1). Therefore, dismantling or negating the effects of such on women as well as other longstanding marginalized groups, including youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disabled, should be a priority for agricultural development initiatives and programs.

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