




Ranking Empowerment Mechanisms in Group Therapy for Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and rank the key empowerment mechanisms that emerge in group therapy for women through a mixed-method approach combining qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative prioritization.

Methods and Materials: A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was adopted. The first phase consisted of a qualitative literature-based thematic analysis using NVivo 14 to identify empowerment mechanisms from 68 peer-reviewed studies until theoretical saturation was achieved. Six main themes emerged: intrapersonal awareness and self-discovery, interpersonal connection and support, agency and decision-making power, cognitive and emotional regulation skills, collective empowerment and social identity, and transformative change and growth. The second phase involved quantitative ranking using SPSS 26. A structured questionnaire developed from the qualitative findings was distributed to 231 women participants from the United States who had attended group therapy sessions. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) to determine the degree of agreement among participants.

Findings: Results indicated a high level of consensus among participants (Kendall's $W = 0.83$, $p < 0.001$). The mean ranking revealed that intrapersonal awareness and self-discovery ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.41$) was the most significant empowerment mechanism, followed by interpersonal connection and support ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.44$) and agency and decision-making power ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.52$). Lower-ranked mechanisms included cognitive and emotional regulation skills ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.48$), collective empowerment and social identity ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.55$), and transformative change and growth ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.61$).

Conclusion: The study concludes that empowerment in group therapy for women is a progressive process beginning with intrapersonal awareness and extending toward social identity and transformation.

Keywords: Empowerment; Group therapy; Women's psychology; Agency; Emotional regulation

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central pillar of global social and psychological development, encompassing economic, emotional, cognitive, and political dimensions that enable women to exercise agency and self-determination across social systems (Abbas et al., 2021). Within therapeutic and community contexts, empowerment is not merely the absence of oppression but a dynamic process through which women recognize and expand their internal and external resources to attain control over their lives (Abdu et al., 2023). Over the last two decades, scholarship has advanced diverse frameworks to understand empowerment, ranging from micro-level psychological transformations to macro-level structural interventions aimed at gender equality. However, empowerment in group therapy contexts has gained particular attention because it intertwines individual growth, social solidarity, and collective change—a synergy that redefines women's resilience and self-concept (Vejdani et al., 2025).

Empowerment has traditionally been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving personal, relational, and collective components (Selvaraj, 2022). These dimensions reflect psychological self-efficacy, interpersonal negotiation, and participation in community decision-making (Ofosu-Koranteng et al., 2022). Early feminist therapy theorists emphasized that empowerment begins with consciousness-raising and the redefinition of personal narratives in collective spaces. Contemporary interventions, such as empowerment-based educational and therapeutic programs, have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing women's emotional regulation, resilience, and self-esteem (Vejdani et al., 2025). For example, empowerment-based and emotion-focused therapy models have improved coping and adaptive functioning among women exposed to domestic violence by enabling cognitive restructuring and emotional processing. These findings suggest that empowerment mechanisms are deeply rooted in group dynamics, trust-building, and shared reflection.

Economic and social empowerment remain major themes in global development initiatives, yet the underlying psychological mechanisms that sustain empowerment are less often examined. Studies from India, Kenya, and Uganda reveal that women's economic empowerment—though crucial—is insufficient in isolation without parallel growth in emotional awareness and decision-making autonomy (Barak et al., 2024; Keya et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2021).

In rural and marginalized contexts, self-help groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in providing both social capital and emotional empowerment (Choudhury & Pal, 2025). Microcredit programs and cooperative banking structures have also shown transformative potential by improving women's negotiation power, self-worth, and social visibility (Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025). Nonetheless, empowerment is often moderated by cultural, familial, and institutional power relations that can either reinforce or restrict agency (Kilgallen et al., 2025). Thus, understanding empowerment as a psychosocial process requires moving beyond financial access toward examining emotional, relational, and cognitive empowerment—core elements that are often cultivated within therapeutic group settings.

Within the field of psychotherapy, group processes have been identified as fertile grounds for empowerment due to their inherently social and reflective nature (Fung et al., 2021). Group therapy facilitates the development of interpersonal empathy, collective resilience, and shared identity, allowing participants to challenge internalized oppression and reconstruct self-concepts. Feminist and empowerment-oriented therapies emphasize that healing occurs through dialogue, mutual recognition, and the validation of lived experience. This therapeutic environment promotes emotional safety, assertiveness, and autonomy—central mechanisms of empowerment (Vejdani et al., 2025). The literature also suggests that empowerment in group contexts extends beyond psychological wellbeing, influencing economic participation, leadership, and community engagement (Mandal, 2024; Sarawagi & Singh, 2025).

In many cultural settings, empowerment initiatives are mediated by social expectations and patriarchal hierarchies that shape women's access to resources and their sense of agency (Abdu et al., 2023; Kilgallen et al., 2025). In Tanzania, divergent gender norms have complicated men's understanding of women's empowerment, revealing tensions between traditional support roles and progressive participation in shared decision-making (Kilgallen et al., 2025). Similarly, in Ghana and Ethiopia, women's empowerment has been found to correlate strongly with shifts in community attitudes and household decision-making power (Kinati et al., 2022; Ofosu-Koranteng et al., 2022). These findings underscore the interplay between personal empowerment and collective identity formation, both of which are reinforced through social learning processes typical of group-based interventions.

Furthermore, education and vocational training have been recognized as key vehicles for empowerment, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Meena & Jain, 2024; Uprety, 2024). Vocational programs targeting women's self-help groups have enhanced self-confidence, technical competence, and financial independence, fostering sustained empowerment that transcends economic dimensions (Kumari, 2024). In parallel, digital and media-based empowerment movements, such as social media advocacy campaigns, have redefined the meaning of empowerment by emphasizing visibility and collective expression (Shata & Seelig, 2021; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). However, the digital context also introduces paradoxes of "forced empowerment," where societal pressures to appear empowered can undermine genuine self-determination (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). This duality demonstrates the importance of grounding empowerment within supportive, authentic interpersonal contexts, such as therapeutic groups, where vulnerability and growth coexist.

Recent evidence from agricultural and development sectors also illustrates that empowerment is contingent upon access to decision-making power and intra-household negotiation capacity (Crookston et al., 2021; Thobejane et al., 2023). In Uganda and Burkina Faso, empowerment indices revealed that when women gain voice and recognition in agricultural decisions, their sense of self-worth and wellbeing significantly improve (Barak et al., 2024; Crookston et al., 2021). Similarly, in South Africa, measuring empowerment through the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) demonstrated that psychosocial and relational variables predict empowerment more strongly than material ones (Thobejane et al., 2023). The emphasis on relational empowerment aligns with therapeutic models that prioritize emotional connection, shared agency, and collective transformation.

At the psychological level, empowerment processes overlap with emotion regulation, resilience, and self-efficacy—key constructs explored in counseling and mental health research (Vejdani et al., 2025). Empowerment-based educational programs, such as those implemented in Iran and India, have successfully improved resilience and adaptive coping among women experiencing domestic or emotional trauma (Sarawagi & Singh, 2024; Vejdani et al., 2025). These findings highlight empowerment as both an outcome and a mechanism within therapy. Empowerment fosters emotional awareness, reframes self-perception, and builds the cognitive flexibility needed to confront systemic and interpersonal challenges. Consequently, empowerment

mechanisms in group therapy are not static traits but interactive processes encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social dimensions.

Moreover, the intersection between empowerment and health-related behaviors has gained prominence in global public health. Access to sanitation and participation in community hygiene initiatives, for instance, have been shown to empower women by enhancing agency and improving community roles (Sabri & Nastiti, 2025; Uprety, 2024). Health-based empowerment fosters leadership, collective efficacy, and participatory governance, paralleling psychological empowerment outcomes observed in therapeutic settings. Similarly, femvertising and media representation have redefined gender perceptions and purchasing intentions by portraying empowered women as aspirational figures, influencing both consumer behavior and gender norms (Yang et al., 2025). These evolving representations underscore that empowerment is both a personal experience and a cultural discourse shaped through collective communication and social narratives.

Cultural and contextual variations continue to influence how empowerment is defined, measured, and sustained (Wenda & Fon, 2021). In rural and conservative societies, empowerment often manifests through subtle shifts in relational power rather than overt independence (Abbas et al., 2021). This contextual sensitivity necessitates culturally attuned frameworks capable of capturing empowerment's diverse manifestations across settings. As such, qualitative inquiry remains essential for identifying context-specific empowerment mechanisms, while quantitative approaches can assess their relative significance and interrelations. The integration of both perspectives is crucial for constructing a holistic understanding of empowerment in therapeutic and social domains (Sarawagi & Singh, 2025; Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025).

Despite substantial progress, challenges persist in defining the psychological components of empowerment distinct from socioeconomic indicators. While group-based interventions consistently report increased self-confidence, autonomy, and emotional regulation among women, there remains limited consensus regarding which mechanisms are most influential or how they interact over time (Barak et al., 2024; Kumari, 2024). Addressing these gaps requires an evidence-based framework capable of identifying, ranking, and validating the most salient mechanisms of empowerment within therapeutic contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to identify and rank the key empowerment mechanisms operating in group therapy for

women through a mixed-method approach combining qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative ranking analysis.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, combining a qualitative phase for conceptual exploration and a quantitative phase for empirical ranking. In the first phase, a qualitative literature-based review was conducted to identify empowerment mechanisms in group therapy for women. The purpose of this phase was to achieve theoretical saturation by synthesizing the most recurrent themes and mechanisms reported in peer-reviewed journals, books, and doctoral dissertations related to group therapy, feminist therapy, and women's empowerment.

In the second phase, the derived mechanisms were ranked and validated through a quantitative survey. The target population consisted of women from the United States who had previously participated in any structured group therapy program addressing personal growth, mental health, or empowerment. Using a purposive sampling technique, a total of 231 participants were recruited through therapy centers, women's support organizations, and online counseling networks. Inclusion criteria included: (a) being female aged 20–55 years, (b) having attended at least six group therapy sessions, and (c) providing informed consent to participate in the study.

2.2. Measures

In the qualitative phase, data were collected through a systematic literature review focusing on empirical and theoretical sources discussing empowerment processes in women's group therapy contexts. Databases such as PsycINFO, Scopus, PubMed, and ScienceDirect were systematically searched using keywords including “group therapy,” “empowerment,” “women,” “mechanisms,” and “psychological growth.” Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed English-language publications from 2000 to 2025. The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new empowerment mechanisms emerged from the literature.

In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the qualitative findings. Respondents rated the importance of each empowerment mechanism on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not Important, 5 = Extremely Important). The survey was distributed online using secure research platforms to ensure anonymity and voluntary participation. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants were informed about confidentiality and data usage.

2.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data (collected from the literature) were analyzed using thematic content analysis in NVivo 14 software. Coding involved three iterative steps: open coding to identify preliminary empowerment concepts, axial coding to group related mechanisms, and selective coding to synthesize overarching categories. The trustworthiness of qualitative analysis was ensured through expert peer debriefing and intercoder reliability checks.

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) were computed to summarize the data. To rank empowerment mechanisms, the mean scores of each mechanism were calculated and ordered from highest to lowest. Additionally, Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) was applied to assess the degree of agreement among participants regarding the ranking of mechanisms. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of this study aimed to conceptualize and structure the core empowerment mechanisms in group therapy for women through an integrative literature review. Using thematic analysis in NVivo 14, a total of 68 peer-reviewed sources were examined until theoretical saturation was achieved. The analysis yielded six overarching themes (categories) representing distinct yet interrelated mechanisms through which group therapy enhances women's empowerment. Each theme comprised multiple subthemes and conceptual indicators (open codes) reflecting the psychological, social, and behavioral dimensions of empowerment.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Conceptual Indicators of Empowerment Mechanisms in Group Therapy for Women

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Intrapersonal Awareness and Self-Discovery	1.1 Emotional insight	Identifying core emotions; emotional labeling; reducing suppression; exploring emotional roots; learning self-compassion
	1.2 Cognitive reframing	Challenging irrational beliefs; adopting growth mindset; positive self-talk; restructuring negative thoughts
	1.3 Self-acceptance and authenticity	Embracing imperfection; reducing shame; recognizing personal strengths; living congruently
2. Interpersonal Connection and Support	2.1 Shared experiences	Recognizing universality; reducing isolation; collective validation
	2.2 Empathic communication	Active listening; nonjudgmental response; empathic mirroring; validating emotions
	2.3 Group cohesion	Developing trust; emotional bonding; sense of belonging; safety in disclosure; mutual accountability
	2.4 Peer role modeling	Observing positive change; learning through peers; adopting adaptive coping models
3. Agency and Decision-Making Power	3.1 Goal setting	Defining personal objectives; identifying barriers; prioritizing achievable steps
	3.2 Assertiveness training	Setting boundaries; expressing needs clearly; negotiating conflicts constructively
	3.3 Autonomy in choices	Reducing dependency; increasing self-responsibility; making self-determined decisions
4. Cognitive and Emotional Regulation Skills	4.1 Mindfulness and presence	Grounding techniques; awareness of inner states; non-reactivity; body–mind connection
	4.2 Coping flexibility	Reappraising stressors; seeking adaptive strategies; balancing emotion and reason
5. Collective Empowerment and Social Identity	5.1 Feminist consciousness-raising	Recognizing systemic inequality; understanding gendered experiences; collective voice development
	5.2 Social solidarity	Forming support networks; mutual advocacy; community participation
	5.3 Leadership within the group	Role rotation; facilitation skills; empowering others; self-efficacy as change agent
6. Transformative Change and Growth	6.1 Behavioral activation	Engaging in valued actions; overcoming avoidance; implementing new coping behaviors
	6.2 Resilience building	Rebounding from setbacks; emotional endurance; optimism cultivation
	6.3 Meaning reconstruction	Reinterpreting life events; spiritual or existential growth; integrating new identity narratives

The first theme, Intrapersonal Awareness and Self-Discovery, emerged as a foundational mechanism of empowerment in group therapy for women. The reviewed literature consistently emphasized that empowerment begins with enhanced self-awareness and emotional insight, allowing participants to recognize, label, and process suppressed emotions. Through cognitive reframing and reflective exercises, women learned to challenge irrational beliefs, replace self-critical thoughts with affirming perspectives, and cultivate self-compassion. This internal reorientation fostered authenticity and self-acceptance, enabling participants to embrace their imperfections, acknowledge personal strengths, and align their actions with their true values. The therapeutic environment thus functioned as a mirror through which women could explore their identities, reshape their self-perceptions, and initiate personal transformation.

The second theme, Interpersonal Connection and Support, reflected the critical role of relational dynamics in

facilitating empowerment. Group therapy provided a safe, empathic space where women could share experiences of vulnerability and recognize the universality of their struggles. This collective recognition reduced feelings of isolation and shame, fostering a sense of belonging. Empathic communication and group cohesion strengthened trust and emotional safety, allowing participants to disclose sensitive experiences without fear of judgment. Additionally, peer role modeling emerged as a powerful influence—women observing others’ growth and resilience were inspired to internalize similar adaptive behaviors. The reciprocal exchange of support not only strengthened interpersonal bonds but also reinforced each woman’s sense of social competence and collective identity.

The third theme, Agency and Decision-Making Power, highlighted the process of developing autonomy and control over one’s life. Empowerment in this domain involved setting meaningful goals, identifying obstacles, and taking deliberate steps toward change. Through assertiveness

training and guided discussions, women learned to articulate their needs, establish boundaries, and negotiate interpersonal conflicts constructively. These experiences cultivated self-responsibility and reduced dependency on external validation, nurturing an internalized sense of control and self-determination. The transition from passive coping to proactive decision-making marked a crucial psychological shift, as participants began to perceive themselves as capable agents capable of shaping their personal and social realities.

The fourth theme, Cognitive and Emotional Regulation Skills, encompassed the development of psychological tools necessary for adaptive functioning and empowerment. Mindfulness practices and grounding techniques enhanced participants' awareness of internal experiences, fostering non-reactivity to distressing emotions. This emotional literacy facilitated better management of stress, anxiety, and anger—emotions that often hinder empowerment. The cultivation of coping flexibility allowed women to reappraise stressful situations, employ balanced problem-solving, and integrate emotion-focused and rational strategies. As a result, participants gained the capacity to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively, contributing to greater emotional resilience and psychological stability within and beyond the therapeutic setting.

The fifth theme, Collective Empowerment and Social Identity, represented the transformation of individual awareness into shared consciousness and collective action. Group therapy became a site of feminist consciousness-raising where women explored the influence of patriarchal norms and systemic inequalities on their lives. Through dialogue and mutual reflection, participants developed social solidarity and recognized the power of collective voice in challenging oppressive narratives. This process expanded empowerment from personal growth to community

engagement, as women formed supportive networks and began to participate in social or advocacy activities. Leadership roles within the group further strengthened their confidence, as facilitating discussions and supporting peers reinforced their emerging sense of agency and purpose as contributors to broader social change.

The final theme, Transformative Change and Growth, encapsulated the culmination of empowerment as a dynamic, ongoing process. Behavioral activation encouraged participants to apply insights from therapy into real-life contexts—taking initiative, confronting fears, and engaging in valued actions. As they experienced mastery and success, resilience and optimism grew stronger, enabling them to recover more effectively from setbacks. Meaning reconstruction was a defining aspect of this phase, as women reinterpreted painful experiences in light of newfound understanding and integrated them into coherent life narratives. This transformative growth extended beyond therapy, fostering enduring changes in self-concept, interpersonal functioning, and life orientation, marking empowerment as both an outcome and a continuing developmental journey.

The second phase aimed to empirically rank the empowerment mechanisms identified in the qualitative stage according to their perceived importance among women who had participated in group therapy. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 231 participants in the United States. Each mechanism, derived from the qualitative themes, was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not Important to 5 = Extremely Important. The mean values for each mechanism were calculated using SPSS version 26, and the Kendall's coefficient of concordance ($W = 0.83, p < 0.001$) confirmed a high level of agreement among respondents regarding the rankings.

Table 2

Ranking of Empowerment Mechanisms in Group Therapy for Women

Rank	Empowerment Mechanism	Mean Score (1–5)	Standard Deviation
1	Intrapersonal Awareness and Self-Discovery	4.58	0.41
2	Interpersonal Connection and Support	4.47	0.44
3	Agency and Decision-Making Power	4.35	0.52
4	Cognitive and Emotional Regulation Skills	4.29	0.48
5	Collective Empowerment and Social Identity	4.18	0.55
6	Transformative Change and Growth	4.11	0.61

The ranking results revealed that Intrapersonal Awareness and Self-Discovery was perceived as the most essential mechanism of empowerment, indicating that

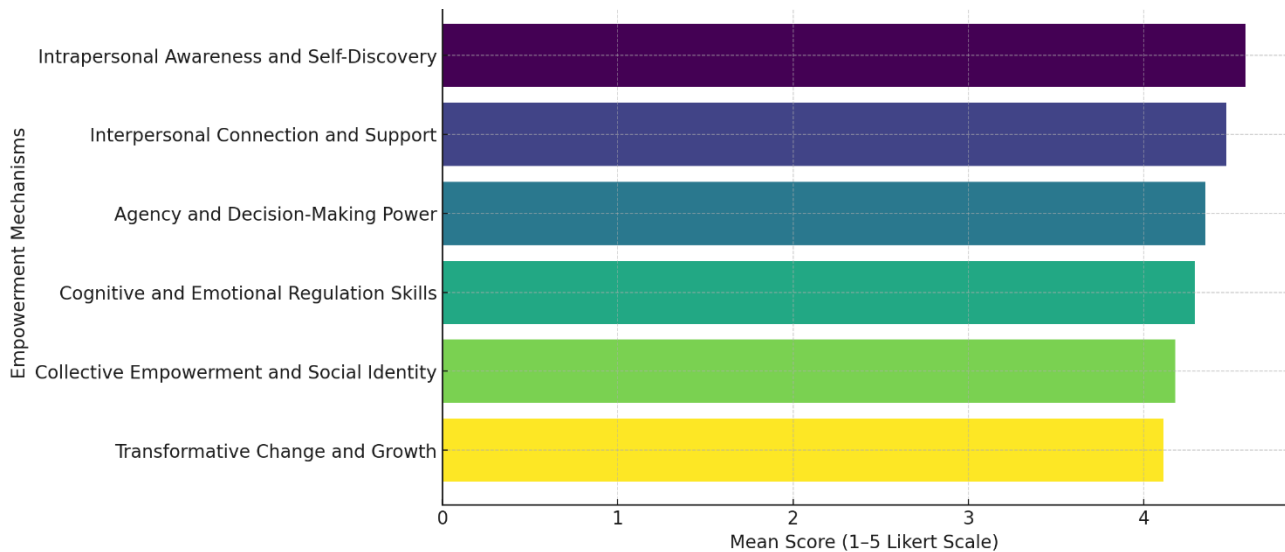
internal transformation, self-reflection, and cognitive reframing play a pivotal role in fostering women's growth within therapeutic settings. Interpersonal Connection and

Support followed closely, suggesting that shared experiences and relational validation remain key facilitators of empowerment. Mechanisms emphasizing personal agency and emotional regulation ranked moderately high, highlighting the importance of psychological control and behavioral competence. Meanwhile, Collective Empowerment and Social Identity and Transformative

Change and Growth—though significant—received slightly lower mean scores, possibly reflecting their more advanced and integrative nature that develops later in the therapeutic process. Overall, these findings support a progressive model of empowerment, where self-awareness and connection precede social identity formation and transformative behavioral change.

Figure 1

Ranking of Empowerment Mechanisms in Group Therapy for Women



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and rank the key empowerment mechanisms within group therapy for women through a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach. Findings from the qualitative phase revealed six overarching mechanisms: intrapersonal awareness and self-discovery, interpersonal connection and support, agency and decision-making power, cognitive and emotional regulation skills, collective empowerment and social identity, and transformative change and growth. Quantitative results from the ranking analysis indicated that *intrapersonal awareness and self-discovery* and *interpersonal connection and support* were the most influential mechanisms, followed by *agency and decision-making power*, *cognitive and emotional regulation*, *collective empowerment and social identity*, and finally *transformative change and growth*. These results provide empirical evidence that empowerment within group therapy emerges as a multidimensional and progressive process, beginning with internal self-awareness and extending toward social participation and transformation.

The finding that *intrapersonal awareness and self-discovery* was the highest-ranked mechanism highlights the primacy of personal reflection, emotional insight, and cognitive reframing in women's empowerment journeys. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing self-recognition and emotional literacy as foundational to empowerment in psychological and social contexts (Selvaraj, 2022; Vejdani et al., 2025). Empowerment-based therapeutic models encourage individuals to identify personal values, reframe limiting beliefs, and cultivate self-acceptance—processes that have been shown to enhance resilience and emotional regulation among women facing interpersonal or societal challenges (Abdu et al., 2023; Vejdani et al., 2025). For example, empowerment-focused and emotion-oriented interventions among women experiencing domestic violence have demonstrated significant improvements in self-efficacy and mental stability through fostering introspection and authenticity (Vejdani et al., 2025). Similarly, qualitative studies among female farmers and entrepreneurs suggest that awareness of one's capabilities and recognition of intrinsic worth are prerequisites for meaningful participation in collective and

economic decision-making (Abdu et al., 2023; Kinati et al., 2022). Therefore, the centrality of intrapersonal mechanisms in the current study underscores the therapeutic importance of self-knowledge as a catalyst for wider social and behavioral transformation.

The second-ranked mechanism, *interpersonal connection and support*, reinforces the critical role of shared experience and relational bonding in the empowerment process. In group therapy, interpersonal validation and empathic dialogue foster a sense of belonging and diminish feelings of isolation—psychological conditions frequently reported among women coping with trauma, discrimination, or marginalization (Choudhury & Pal, 2025; Kilgallen et al., 2025). Studies on self-help groups (SHGs) in India and community collectives in Kenya and Uganda confirm that mutual support not only enhances emotional well-being but also strengthens women's sense of identity and agency (Barak et al., 2024; Choudhury & Pal, 2025; Keya et al., 2025). Through shared narratives, women collectively reconstruct experiences of powerlessness into stories of solidarity and resilience. This aligns with feminist therapeutic perspectives that view empowerment as relational, emerging through intersubjective recognition and the creation of safe, trust-based group environments (Fung et al., 2021; Vejdani et al., 2025). Moreover, the positive impact of peer modeling observed in the study reflects findings from participatory empowerment projects in rural Ethiopia and Ghana, where social support networks increased confidence and sustained behavioral change (Kinati et al., 2022; Ofosu-Koranteng et al., 2022).

The mechanism *agency and decision-making power* ranked third, emphasizing the behavioral dimension of empowerment, which translates awareness into assertive action. Decision-making autonomy has long been identified as a core indicator of women's empowerment across contexts, from household negotiations to professional and community leadership (Abbas et al., 2021; Mandal, 2024). In therapy, agency manifests as the capacity to set goals, establish boundaries, and make self-determined choices—behaviors that symbolize the shift from dependence to control. Empirical studies in India, Pakistan, and Tanzania show that women's participation in structured group programs significantly improves their confidence to make personal and financial decisions (Abbas et al., 2021; Kilgallen et al., 2025; Sarawagi & Singh, 2025). These findings suggest that collective engagement enhances self-efficacy, leading to measurable changes in household and community power dynamics. In the current study,

participants' emphasis on assertiveness and autonomy corresponds with previous research demonstrating that empowerment-based interventions strengthen women's negotiation capacities and psychological readiness to assume leadership roles (Kumar et al., 2021; Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025).

Cognitive and emotional regulation skills were ranked fourth, highlighting the intersection of empowerment and psychological adaptability. The ability to manage emotions, tolerate distress, and engage in mindful reflection was repeatedly associated with empowerment outcomes in previous studies (Selvaraj, 2022; Vejdani et al., 2025). Emotional regulation fosters psychological resilience and enables women to navigate adversity without reverting to patterns of helplessness or avoidance. Empowerment programs incorporating cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness techniques have demonstrated improvements in women's mental health, confidence, and relational satisfaction (Vejdani et al., 2025). In agricultural and social empowerment studies, emotional regulation has also been identified as a moderating factor influencing the success of empowerment initiatives, as emotional self-management contributes to effective communication and sustained participation (Crookston et al., 2021; Thobejane et al., 2023). The integration of these skills within therapeutic settings reinforces the notion that psychological empowerment extends beyond cognitive insight to include emotional competence and behavioral flexibility.

The fifth mechanism, *collective empowerment and social identity*, situates empowerment within a broader sociocultural framework, emphasizing how group belonging transforms individual empowerment into collective agency. Previous research confirms that empowerment initiatives are most sustainable when they strengthen social identity and community solidarity (Barak et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2021). Self-help groups and cooperatives foster not only economic mobility but also social recognition and shared purpose, particularly in patriarchal societies where women's voices have been historically marginalized (Sarawagi & Singh, 2024; Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025). This study's results echo these findings, suggesting that when women identify with empowered peers and engage in collective action, their sense of self-efficacy and belonging expands. Cross-cultural studies from Ghana, Ethiopia, and Cameroon illustrate that community engagement and group identity significantly predict empowerment outcomes (Kinati et al., 2022; Ofosu-Koranteng et al., 2022; Wenda & Fon, 2021). Similarly, digital forms of collective empowerment—such

as advocacy through social media—have amplified women's participation in global dialogues, though with mixed effects depending on cultural context (Shata & Seelig, 2021; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Thus, collective empowerment bridges psychological and sociopolitical dimensions, fostering both internal strength and external influence.

The final theme, *transformative change and growth*, though ranked lowest, represents the culmination of empowerment as a lifelong developmental trajectory. This phase involves the consolidation of insights gained in therapy into actionable and sustainable personal change. Behavioral activation, resilience, and meaning reconstruction were central to this dimension. Previous research across contexts supports the idea that empowerment unfolds in stages, with transformation marking the integration of self-awareness, agency, and social engagement into a coherent identity (Sarawagi & Singh, 2025; Selvaraj, 2022). In group settings, such transformation manifests in women's ability to translate therapeutic insights into community leadership, entrepreneurship, or advocacy roles. For instance, agritourism projects in the Philippines and sanitation initiatives in Nepal illustrate how psychological empowerment can evolve into tangible socio-environmental contributions (Lapuz et al., 2024; Uprety, 2024). These examples confirm that empowerment's ultimate success lies in translating internal growth into societal participation. The lower ranking of this theme in the present study may reflect its advanced nature, requiring time and external support to manifest fully after therapy ends.

Overall, the ranking pattern observed in this study supports an integrative model of empowerment in which internal mechanisms such as self-awareness and emotional regulation form the base, while interpersonal and collective dimensions sustain growth and transformation. This progression parallels previous findings that empowerment develops through successive phases—beginning with cognitive insight, followed by emotional mastery, social participation, and eventual transformative action (Kumari, 2024; Sarawagi & Singh, 2025; Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025). The strong concordance among participants (Kendall's $W = 0.83$, $p < 0.001$) also highlights the consistency of these perceptions across diverse demographic and experiential backgrounds. Furthermore, the interrelationship between themes suggests that empowerment should not be viewed as linear but as a cyclical process where self-awareness reinforces social identity and vice versa. These findings advance theoretical

understanding by emphasizing the psychosocial mechanisms that underpin empowerment in group therapy—mechanisms that have often been overshadowed by economic or policy-driven perspectives (Abbas et al., 2021; Barak et al., 2024; Kilgallen et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence from previous empowerment frameworks supports this multidimensional interpretation. For example, research in India and Bangladesh demonstrates that empowerment outcomes improve when psychological interventions are integrated with economic initiatives (Mandal, 2024; Vashanth & Sengottuvel, 2025). Similarly, gender-sensitive empowerment programs that include men as allies—such as those in Tanzania and Ghana—have shown greater community acceptance and sustainability (Kilgallen et al., 2025; Ofosu-Koranteng et al., 2022). These parallels suggest that therapy-based empowerment mechanisms share structural features with community-based approaches: both rely on shared meaning, agency, and collective efficacy. In the digital and media spheres, the emergence of femvertising has reshaped gender identity representation and self-perception, demonstrating how external narratives of empowerment influence internal self-concept (Yang et al., 2025). In this sense, therapeutic empowerment processes mirror broader societal trends in redefining gender, identity, and agency.

Finally, the results substantiate the need for integrated empowerment frameworks that merge psychological, economic, and social dimensions. Empowerment cannot be fully achieved through external interventions alone; it must involve internal transformation supported by collective participation and sustainable social structures. This conclusion resonates with the findings of multi-country studies emphasizing empowerment as both an individual and systemic process (Crookston et al., 2021; Thobejane et al., 2023; Wenda & Fon, 2021). Therefore, group therapy offers a microcosm for testing and nurturing empowerment dynamics that can later be scaled into community or institutional contexts.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its valuable contributions, this study presents certain limitations. The reliance on self-reported data in the quantitative phase may introduce response biases, such as social desirability or recall effects. The sample, although sufficient in size, was geographically limited to the United States, which may reduce the generalizability of findings across diverse cultural settings. Moreover, the qualitative

phase relied solely on literature-based data rather than direct participant interviews, which, while systematic, may omit context-specific nuances of lived experiences. Finally, the ranking approach, while useful for prioritization, simplifies complex and interdependent psychological mechanisms into linear orderings, potentially underestimating their dynamic interrelations.

Future research should incorporate cross-cultural and longitudinal designs to explore how empowerment mechanisms evolve over time and within different sociocultural contexts. Integrating qualitative interviews or focus groups with women from various backgrounds could enrich understanding of how culture, class, and religion shape empowerment trajectories. Comparative studies between therapy-based and community-based empowerment models would also clarify transferability of mechanisms across domains. Finally, future work could develop a validated measurement tool specifically designed to assess empowerment in group therapy, linking psychological outcomes with behavioral and social indicators.

Practitioners should emphasize intrapersonal awareness and emotional regulation as initial stages of empowerment while progressively incorporating interpersonal and collective dimensions. Group facilitators can integrate mindfulness, cognitive reframing, and peer modeling exercises to strengthen self-efficacy and empathy. Programs should also encourage leadership roles within groups to cultivate agency and collective identity. Finally, empowerment-based group therapy should be embedded within broader community and policy frameworks to ensure sustained transformation beyond the therapeutic setting.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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