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Beyond the obvious: Investigating underutilised strategies for empowering women survivors of violence and marginalisation in Africa

Azwihangwisi J. MPHIDI and Debra C. PHEIFFER

ABSTRACT

Despite decades of gender-based violence (GBV) interventions in Africa, empowerment strategies for women survivors often rely on conventional measures such as legal reform, shelters, and aid, which overlook community-rooted innovations. This article explores underutilised, culturally anchored strategies across African regions, including faith-based advocacy, storytelling cooperatives, indigenous healing, women's energy initiatives, and stokvel networks. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and African-centred theory as frameworks, this study argues that sustainable empowerment arises from survivor leadership, collective agency, and green innovation. Examples like women-led stokvels, solar energy cooperatives, trauma-informed entrepreneurship, and mobile justice demonstrate how empowerment can be holistic and contextually grounded. By centring regional philosophies and survivor agency, the article offers a practical roadmap for advancing social justice and gender equity in African communities. The findings suggest that policies and programmes must support locally driven, survivor-led models to address survivors' complex needs from safety to self-actualisation. It is recommended that policymakers, practitioners, and funders prioritise investment in integrated, culturally relevant, and sustainable empowerment approaches that amplify survivor voices and leverage indigenous knowledge.

KEY TERMS: African-centred frameworks, gender-based violence (GBV), indigenous knowledge, solar energy cooperative, survivor agency, women empowerment

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Mphidi Azwihangwisi Judith, Department of Law, Safety and Security Management, Tshwane University of Technology. Email: mphidiAJ@tut.ac.za.
- Pheiffer Debra Clare, Department of Law, Safety and Security Management, Tshwane University of Technology. Email: PheifferDC@tut.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

In many African communities, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a deeply rooted challenge that undermines the safety, dignity, and well-being of women survivors. Despite decades of reforms and aid, mainstream empowerment responses, such as shelters and legal remedies, often fail to address survivors' complex, long-term needs. Survivors are frequently left to rebuild their lives anew after offenders, often former family breadwinners, serve correctional sentences, resulting in multifaceted needs spanning physical, psychological, social, and economic domains. This study investigates how these needs, conceptualised through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and African-centred theoretical frameworks, can be met through underutilised, culturally grounded strategies that emphasise community agency and survivor leadership.

These strategies include women-led stokvels, solar cooperatives, and trauma-informed entrepreneurship. Guided by this integrated theoretical lens, the research explores holistic approaches that aim to fulfil survivors' physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualisation needs. It seeks to understand which community-led, culturally grounded approaches effectively empower women survivors across diverse African regions, how these align with global empowerment concepts and African intellectual traditions, and ways to incorporate them sustainably into programmes and policies ensuring survivor-led empowerment for the long term. The answers to these questions are explicitly reflected in the discussion section, contributing to closing knowledge gaps and framing culturally appropriate, successful empowerment initiatives in Africa.

The article proceeds by providing essential background and detailing the theoretical framework that integrates Maslow's hierarchy with African-centred perspectives. It examines regional applications of these frameworks through a comprehensive literature study and thematic synthesis, exploring innovations that cut across renewable energy as holistic empowerment, psychological support, economic empowerment through collective models, and social support augmented by digital services. The results section presents empirical and thematic findings, which inform the discussion on the transformative potential of survivor-led, culturally resonant empowerment models. The conclusion, implications, and recommendations sections emphasise the need for policymakers, funders, and practitioners to prioritise integrated, sustainable empowerment strategies that elevate survivor leadership and harness indigenous knowledge and modern technologies to foster social justice and gender equity among African women survivors of violence.

BACKGROUND

Despite sustained advocacy and legal reforms, women survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in Africa continue to face major gaps in mainstream responses. Formal services such as shelters, legal aid, and basic assistance address only immediate survival needs, leaving long-term autonomy, dignity, and healing unsupported. Research shows that many survivors avoid seeking help due to fear, shame, stigma, and weak family or community backing, highlighting the urgent need for holistic, survivor-centred services that break cycles of violence and foster sustainable empowerment (United Nations Women Africa, 2020; Chisale, 2020; Vohra, 2023). Barriers to accessing support services become especially evident during active abuse within a family in a community.

Multisectoral, community-led approaches are becoming central to addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Africa, with South Africa's NSP-GBVF 2020–2030 providing a coordinated, survivor-centred framework that integrates prevention, justice, response, and economic empowerment (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020; Justice Department, 2020; Presidency of South Africa, 2024). Community programmes such as Sinani's youth trauma recovery initiatives demonstrate sustainable empowerment through grassroots engagement (Sinani Community Foundation, 2024).

Sinani is a registered non-profit organisation located in the lowveld region of South Africa. The Lowveld includes provinces like Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. The organisation supports community-led initiatives that provide food and care to orphans, vulnerable children, and widows. It partners with local leaders who are committed to serving their communities but require additional resources, with the overall aim of establishing fully functioning life centres in each area (Sinani, 2025). While women-led renewable energy projects across Africa advance safety, independence, and environmental sustainability (World Bank WEN Africa, 2024; Energia, 2025).

South Africa's recent 90-day GBV campaign further signals state commitment to accountability (Government of South Africa, 2025). Together, these efforts highlight the importance of expanding GBV responses through culturally relevant, context-specific, and comprehensive empowerment strategies. In rural and marginalised communities, survivors often lack access to supportive networks, which are unavailable, culturally misaligned, or heavily stigmatised, leaving psychological, social, and economic harm unaddressed (Mtetwa et al., 2021). The neglect of indigenous, community-based solutions, long resilient across African societies, further deepens this gap. Collective mechanisms such as stokvels, survivor-led cooperatives, and renewable energy-powered mutual aid networks offer underutilised pathways for empowerment, with solar initiatives enhancing safety, economic independence, and psychosocial well-being, helping survivors regain agency, purpose, and dignity (Collins

English Dictionary, 2025; African Social Work & Development Network, 2025; Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study’s theoretical frameworks are African-centred, aligning with the lived experiences and values of marginalised women across Africa. Grounding the research in socioecological theory enriches the analysis by situating survivors’ experiences within interrelated individual, relational, community, and societal levels. African-centred frameworks provide culturally specific and regionally relevant understandings of empowerment, enabling a nuanced interpretation that considers both systemic and individual factors (Heise, 1998; Mendenhall & Bahn, 2020). Ubuntu (care, communal support), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Ubuntu, Sankofa (collective identity, memory), African Feminism (leadership, agency), Afrocentricity, and trauma-informed empowerment. These frameworks reflect how dignity, agency, and empowerment are culturally and regionally grounded in various African contexts (African Social Work & Development Network, 2025). Empowerment is most effective when it aligns with indigenous philosophies that complement Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs by addressing not only survival but also belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation.

Integrating Maslow with African-Centred Frameworks

Alongside the values- and community-orientated focus of African-centred frameworks, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs adds a psychological dimension emphasising progression from basic survival to self-actualisation. This combination highlights the importance of empowerment strategies that comprehensively address both the psychological and physical experiences of survivors, ensuring holistic healing and growth (Taylor, 2021).

Table 1: Maslow’s Levels

Maslow's Level	African Frameworks	Renewable Energy & Empowerment Examples
Physiological	<i>Ubuntu</i> (care, communal support)	Solar lanterns improve safety, lighting, and access to basic needs
Safety	<i>Ujamaa</i> (cooperative economics)	Community solar grids offer stable energy and economic relief
Belongingness	<i>Ubuntu, Sankofa</i> (collective identity, memory)	Solar cooperatives foster group membership, healing, and collective identity
Esteem	<i>African Feminism</i> (leadership, agency)	Women-led energy projects restore self-worth, purpose, and visibility
Self-Actualisation	<i>Afrocentricity</i> , trauma-informed empowerment	Green entrepreneurship enables survivor-led innovation and advocacy

Source: Drawing on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and seminal works on African-centred frameworks (see also African Social Work & Development Network, 2025, p.2; Nhlapo, 2020, p.123; Mphuthi and Dlamini, 2021, p.883; Tchumba and Ngo, 2022, p.48).

This synthesis highlights the multifaceted nature of empowerment as requiring dignity restoration across all need levels. Embedding renewable energy projects within Indigenous, community-owned value systems elevates them beyond technical fixes to cultural and psychosocial interventions.

Key African-centred theories supporting the research include:

- Ubuntu (Southern and Central Africa): Emphasises empathy, interconnectedness, and collective healing; foundational for peer support and trauma therapy (Nhlapo, 2020).
- Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics): Originating in Tanzania, promotes shared infrastructure and collective financial resilience like stokvels (Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022).
- Sankofa (West Africa): Meaning “go back and fetch it”, it promotes healing and knowledge-sharing through storytelling and cultural transmission.
- Afrocentricity: Advocates development grounded in African realities, supporting decolonised, survivor-led, community-first strategies (Ndungi Wa Mungai, 2015).

- African Feminist Theories: Frameworks such as womanism and Stiwanim advance cultural transformation, agency, and justice while respecting traditions; feminist sociology further elucidates power dynamics sustaining marginalisation and highlights survivor-centred empowerment (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991).
- Trauma-Informed and Relational Empowerment: Combines psychology and traditional healing, fostering recovery through peer mentorship, community mediation, and group dialogue (Nhlapo, 2020).

Regional Applications of Theory

Below are the five African regions as articulated in the abstract.

Table 2: African Regions, dominant framework and practices

Region	Dominant Framework(s)	Example Practices
North Africa	Islamic Feminism, Ubuntu	Faith-based legal advocacy, women's literacy forums
West Africa	Ujamaa, Sankofa, Motherism	Storytelling circles, women's cooperatives, cultural education programs
Central Africa	Ubuntu, Indigenous Healing Systems	Orature therapy, group mediation, village-led safety forums
East Africa	Ujamaa, Afrocentricity	Women's energy cooperatives, mobile legal clinics, digital access platforms
Southern Africa	Ubuntu, African Feminism	Stokvel networks, trauma support groups, solar mutual aid collectives

Source: drawing on cross-regional analyses of African-centred frameworks (see also African Social Work & Development Network, 2025, p.2; Nhlapo, 2020, p.123; Mphuthi and Dlamini, 2021, p.883; Tchumba and Ngo, 2022, p.48).

Empowerment practices across Africa, from cooperative economics and storytelling in West and Southern Africa to faith-based advocacy and legal reforms in North Africa, demonstrate how these frameworks dynamically adapt to diverse regional sociocultural contexts (Mkhize et al., 2023).

Literature study and thematic synthesis

African-centred empowerment draws on interconnected philosophies such as Ubuntu, which foregrounds empathy and collective healing (Nhlapo, 2020); Ujamaa, which advances cooperative economics and shared community infrastructure (Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022); and Sankofa, which restores knowledge through storytelling and cultural transmission. Complementing these are Afrocentricity, which promotes development rooted in African realities (Ndungi Wa Mungai, 2015), and African feminist theories, including womanism and Stiwanim, that advance cultural transformation, agency, and justice while illuminating the power dynamics that marginalise survivors (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991). Together with trauma-informed and relational empowerment approaches that blend psychology and traditional healing (Nhlapo, 2020), these frameworks support a holistic, survivor-led model of recovery and community resilience. Ten high-quality studies were selected and thematically synthesised.

Table 3: Selected Articles

Title	Authors	Key Findings
Community Mental Health and Peer Support Interventions	Mahapatro & Singh (2019)	Peer support enhances trauma recovery in rural African contexts
Cooperative Economic Models and Stokvels for Survivors	Mphuthi & Dlamini (2021)	Financial collectives reduce dependency and build leadership
Solar Energy Cooperatives and Social	Tchumba & Ngo	Women's solar groups offer income, identity,

Title	Authors	Key Findings
Empowerment	(2022)	and community safety
Business Ownership and Empowerment among Maasai Women	Dutt, Grabe & Castro (2016)	The study found that participation in women-led cooperatives among Maasai women in Tanzania significantly reduces partner control over economic resources and decision-making, thereby enhancing women's financial autonomy, business ownership, and overall empowerment within traditionally patriarchal household and community structures
Gender with Microfinance	Kim et al. (2007)	Gender-focused loans halve intimate partner violence (IPV) and improve self-efficacy
Group Cognitive Processing Therapy	Bass et al. (2013)	Group therapy lowers post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in conflict settings
Economic and Gender/Family Coaching	Ismayilova et al. (2017)	Combined coaching and finance boosts survivor independence
Mobile and Digital Justice Access	Tumwine et al. (2021)	Tech-enabled legal services improve access in remote areas
Multi-Component Programming for Survivors	Sarnquist et al. (2018)	Economic support and trauma counselling reduce IPV in slum areas
Digital Inclusion and Women's Entrepreneurship	Amondi (2021)	Digital literacy enables business but highlights digital exclusion risks

Source: Table designed by Dr AJ Mphidi (researcher).

Also, the literature below was scrutinised to enhance this research in covering aspects relating to underutilised strategies in empowering women survivors of violence.

Framing the gap: Underutilised strategies for empowering women survivors of violence in african communities

Violence against women is rooted in gender inequality and shaped by broader societal and structural factors, including globalisation. Effective reduction requires long-term strategies addressing economic dependence and legal discrimination (UN Women, 2019). While shelters and legal reforms address immediate needs, holistic, community-based approaches, combining social services, economic collectives, peer support, and women-led renewable energy initiatives, better promote leadership, dignity, and empowerment, supporting survivors across Maslow's hierarchy of globalisation from safety to self-actualisation.

Renewable energy as holistic empowerment

Women-led renewable energy projects, particularly solar cooperatives, offer a powerful yet underutilised means of empowering survivors of gender-based violence. Beyond technical purposes, they support economic independence, community leadership, and psychosocial well-being, providing a safe, gender-responsive platform for financial and social empowerment. Renewable energy thus becomes a tool for local economic transformation, communal resilience, and holistic survivor support (UN Women, 2025).

Psychological support innovations

Community-based treatments, technology, and traditional therapies can address anxiety, depression, and PTSD among survivors. Accessible care includes CBT, group therapy, affordable housing, childcare, and legal support. Where formal services are scarce, community-led therapy, peer mentorship, and digital tools like radio and helplines provide culturally relevant support (Pharma, 2025; Mahapatro & Singh, 2019; Bass et al., 2013; Greene et al., 2019).

Economic empowerment and collective models

Economic empowerment is a key protective factor against violence. Collective systems, stokvels, savings groups, and solar cooperatives offer income, safety, and healing spaces. Trauma-informed training within these groups enhances self-reliance. Women-led solar initiatives in Africa strengthen communities, support trauma recovery, and reduce GBV risk by improving independence and safety (Spotlight Initiative, 2024; Ismayilova et al., 2018; Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022).

Social support and digital service integration

Social networks and digital platforms provide survivors with emotional support, reporting tools, and access to justice and care. Mobile clinics, WhatsApp legal aid, and one-stop centres extend services to remote areas. Despite digital gaps, online entrepreneurship and alliances with traditional leaders and male allies show strong potential (Avis, 2017; Tumwine et al., 2021; UN Trust Fund, 2022; Amondi, 2021; CSV, 2023).

Toward survivor-led energy empowerment

Women-led solar cooperatives integrate economics, trauma recovery, and renewable energy. Beyond environmental goals, they foster resilience, autonomy, and dignity through culturally rooted, survivor-led models that strengthen communities and reduce GBV risk (Global Communities, 2025; CIF, 2020; Solar Sister, 2024; UNDP, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses thematic synthesis methodology by systematically reviewing and integrating existing empirical research rather than collecting new primary data. This approach consolidates diverse participatory studies to provide a comprehensive pan-African perspective on empowerment strategies for women survivors of violence (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Ubuntu-based strategies for empowering African women who have experienced violence have also been taken into account and recognised. This synthesis is guided by the Ubuntu Research Approach (URA), rooted in African Indigenous knowledge systems. URA emphasises relational ethics, interconnectedness, and co-learning with communities to ensure research outcomes are shared and collaborative (Hawer, 2018; Maluleke, 2024). Viewing participants as knowledge co-creators, URA employs culturally appropriate methods such as oral histories and debate circles, aligning with the Ubuntu paradigm (Khupe & Keane, 2017).

This study draws all narrative interviews, survivor accounts, and community indaba forums from authoritative sources (African Social Work & Development Network, 2025; Nhlapo, 2020; Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021) rather than original fieldwork. Its conceptual framework, the Ubuntu Research Approach (URA), emphasises interconnection, relational ethics, and collaborative knowledge co-creation. The reviewed studies mentioned under Table 1, selected articles, highlight participatory methods engaging survivors and local leaders as co-researchers, using oral traditions and regional languages, while community indaba forums enabled collective problem-solving and theme validation. In addition, ethical practices, including thematic analysis, informed consent, confidentiality, and benefit-sharing, were consistently applied. The current synthesis advances a robust pan-African methodological paradigm based on analysis of prior empirical work rather than new primary data. The original studies reviewed in this synthesis use iterative feedback methods such as member checks and community forums, involving survivors, local leaders, and traditional healers as co-researchers to promote co-learning and validate emerging themes (Nhlapo, 2020). This participatory ethos reinforces the contextual authenticity and applicability of the findings across diverse African sociocultural settings.

The sample sizes cited in table 3 of the selected studies, such as sixteen women survivors interviewed and an eighteen-participant indaba forum, refer to participant groups described in reviewed empirical studies, not original data collected by the present authors. The sampling methods in these studies outlined in table 1 of selected studies often involve purposive, non-probability sampling to access diverse survivor and community leader voices within African contexts, consistent with Ubuntu Research Approach principles emphasising relational ethics and co-learning. These methodologies prioritise authenticity and cultural relevance through oral histories and community engagement. The ethical rigour demonstrated in the reviewed studies, through informed consent, confidentiality, and benefit-sharing, aligns with Ubuntu principles of respect and collective responsibility (African Social Work & Development Network, 2025). This ethical coherence strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic synthesis findings.

RESULTS

The following results demonstrate the underutilised tactics for empowering African women who have experienced marginalisation and abuse. The comments made by women who have been victims of violence are also summarised in this section.

Synthesis of findings by theme

Common themes about the experiences, causes, and effects of violence, as well as successful prevention techniques, are revealed by a thematic synthesis of research on violence against women. According to research, women encounter several forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Anyango & Renbarger, 2024). Four recurring themes that transcend regional contexts can be found in the literature:

Table 4: Themes on key insights

Theme	Key Insights
Psychological Care	Peer-led healing models and scalable digital tools promote emotional recovery and community resilience
Economic Collectives	Empowerment through stokvels, microfinance, and solar cooperatives enhances both income and self-worth
Integrated Services	Mobile, digital, and multi-sectoral access points improve reach, confidentiality, and continuity of care
Community Anchoring	Culturally adapted, participatory approaches increase sustainability and challenge harmful social norms

Source: Drawing on empirical fieldwork and a multidisciplinary literature review (see Anyango & Renbarger, 2024; Mahapatro & Singh, 2019; Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022).

Across need layers, empowerment and resilience

The findings reveal that women survivors of violence in African communities demonstrate extraordinary resilience, often in the absence of formal support. They navigate trauma, economic insecurity, and cultural constraints while actively forging new pathways to personal and collective empowerment.

Individual and family resilience

From the accounts shared by participants, it becomes clear that neighbourhood savings groups and women's cooperatives operate far beyond their economic function. One survivor explained that when caring for children with almost no income, stokvels offer both hope and practical relief, ensuring the group steps in when food runs out or a home is damaged. Such testimonies illustrate how informal collectives provide dignity, recognition, and a buffer against isolation. Another woman reflected on how leadership within her cooperative transformed not only her confidence but also how her children viewed her, shifting her identity from a struggling survivor to a community pillar. For many participants, joining a women's cooperative marked a turning point, restoring agency, fostering mutual support, and enabling them to uplift others even as they rebuilt their own lives.

Community potential: solar energy as collective resilience

Survivors gain a renewed sense of identity, agency, and leadership through participation in informal economic and psychosocial support networks such as stokvels and women's cooperatives. These groups provide vital safety nets that offer financial assistance during hardships and foster social dignity, reduce isolation, and build confidence among members. Women experience joining cooperatives as transformative, gaining opportunities for income generation through activities like selling energy services and managing charging stations. They also take on leadership roles within these cooperatives, reinforcing collective identity and mutual aid systems. Community forums like indabas legitimise these initiatives by crowdsourcing local solutions and incorporating peer mentorship and support, enabling survivors to guide and support each other effectively. This combination of economic empowerment, psychosocial support, leadership development, and community validation contributes significantly to women's holistic empowerment and social cohesion.

Green innovation as a Maslow-aligned empowerment strategy

When mapped onto Maslow's hierarchy of needs, solar energy cooperatives meet multiple survivor needs at once:

Table 5: Maslow's level of empowerment in solar initiatives

Maslow's Level	Empowerment Contribution of Solar Initiatives
Physiological	Lighting and power for cooking, hygiene, and night-time security
Safety	Reduced risk of GBV in unlit areas; emergency phone charging for crisis response
Belongingness	Membership in women's groups fosters trust, sisterhood, and mutual support
Esteem	Running or facilitating a cooperative builds confidence, community respect, and self-worth
Self-Actualisation	Energy becomes a platform for innovation, business ownership, advocacy, and leadership

Source: Integrating evidence from field reports on African women-led solar cooperatives and core empowerment literature (see Solar Sister; Mercy Corps/ENERGIA; UN Women, 2025; Mahapatro & Singh, 2019; Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022).

Solar cooperatives thus become not only technical instruments but also symbolic platforms for survivor-led development that is transformative in terms of ecology, culture, and psychology.

Conflicts in healing philosophies and community dynamics

This study showed that empowerment efforts do not occur in a vacuum; they often clash with existing power structures and traditional expectations. Survivors reported internal conflicts and community resistance when asserting their autonomy through group participation or innovation.

Family-level tensions

The findings showed that some in-laws or husbands thought empowerment initiatives were disruptive or disloyal: "My husband was upset that I joined a savings group." Although it helps with school tuition, he believed I was discussing our family problems with others. (A personal account).

Village-level resistance

This study found that elders or male leaders occasionally express suspicion towards creative models, particularly those involving women-led energy projects: "Not everyone believes these new ways help, but for us, telling stories and working together is the only way to truly heal." (Leader of a community group). According to this study, disagreements also occur on who has authority over resources, who speaks in public, and whether psychosocial group work and traditional therapy methods can coexist.

Broader philosophical divides

There are conflicts between indigenous relational ideologies and public health logics at the broader community level. Survivors who challenge gendered norms of silence and reliance may be stigmatised as "damaged" or called rebellious. Despite these obstacles, there is strong evidence that progressive voices in communities are actively creating hybrid models that combine digital tools with spiritual dignity and traditional wisdom with green innovation.

Responsible government as enabler

"If our municipality would partner with us, bring safe water, recognise our groups, let us speak, it would mean real progress," the survivors repeatedly stated, emphasising the necessity for partnership-based government rather than paternalism. We want assistance to better take care of ourselves, not freebies (Testimony of Indaba).

Governments are called to play a facilitating and regulating role, ensuring access to financing, protection, and infrastructure for grassroots women-led models, instead of enforcing programs that have been externally developed.

Energy justice as survivor justice

Renewable energy projects, especially women-led solar cooperatives, offer empowerment strategies grounded in culture that go beyond environmental fixes. These survivor-led, community-owned initiatives address basic human needs inaccessible to emergency shelters or legal aid while fostering leadership, income, and identity. Solar cooperatives reclaim energy as a symbol of autonomy and self-worth, combining social trust, ecological stewardship, and indigenous knowledge to create enduring, transferable, and deeply human empowerment solutions.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals the persistent gap in African GBV responses between survivors' complex, multidimensional needs and the support offered by formal systems. Although legal aid, shelters, and emergency interventions remain essential, these conventional models often overlook the holistic, culturally embedded realities of survivors, especially during crises or within marginalised communities where stigma persists (United Nations Women Africa, 2020; Chisale, 2020). The findings underscore the urgent need for empowerment strategies that move beyond immediate survival toward fostering dignity, autonomy, and sustained healing aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and African-centred paradigms.

Discussions emanating from research questions.

Community-led, Culturally Grounded Approaches for Empowerment

- Women-led cooperatives, stokvels, and trauma-informed entrepreneurship emerge as powerful vehicles of empowerment across diverse African contexts. These models address survivors' economic, social, psychological, and leadership needs simultaneously, creating safe spaces that enhance self-worth and communal belonging. For example, women's solar cooperatives not only provide income and leadership opportunities but also improve safety by reducing gender-based violence risks linked to poorly lit environments, demonstrating a holistic empowerment aligned with physiological to self-actualisation needs.
- Incorporating African-centred frameworks such as Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Sankofa enriches understanding of empowerment as relational and collective, emphasising interconnectedness and community healing. This contrasts with Western individualistic notions, stressing instead the socioecological embeddedness of survivors (Mphuthi & Dlamini, 2021; Tchumba & Ngo, 2022). Such culturally resonant approaches offer stronger social support structures, reduce isolation, and build resilience rooted in indigenous knowledge, a critical supplement to formal services that frequently ignore cultural nuance.
- Alignment with Global Empowerment Concepts and African Intellectual Traditions
- The interplay of global empowerment theories with African philosophies reveals shared commitments to agency, autonomy, and social justice but differs importantly in application and emphasis. Maslow's progressive needs hierarchy frames empowerment as a journey from basic survival to innovation and leadership, while African feminist and Afrocentric perspectives stress systemic barriers and the role of community solidarity, spiritual dignity, and collective memory in fostering empowerment (Ndungi Wa Mungai, 2015; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This integrative lens confirms that empowerment is neither solely psychological nor economic but a dynamic process that must recognise historical injustices and cultural specificities.
- Incorporating Strategies into Sustainable Programs and Policies
- For lasting impact, empowerment strategies must be embedded within policies that prioritise survivor leadership, cultural relevance, and multisectoral integration. The findings call for policy frameworks recognising cooperative economics, renewable energy, and community healing as pillars of survivor support, supported by state facilitation, not paternalism (Presidency of South Africa, 2024). Digital inclusion and mobile justice services offer promising platforms to extend reach but need to be coupled with investments in infrastructure and capacity building in marginalised regions.

Challenges remain from entrenched patriarchal norms and community resistance, underscoring the importance of

engaging local leaders and male allies in transformational efforts. Survivor testimonies point to internal family and community tensions when women assert new autonomy, highlighting the delicate negotiation between empowerment and social cohesion that programmes must carefully navigate.

Discussions from a synthesis of multidisciplinary literature review

Mahapatro and Singh (2019) demonstrate that peer support plays a crucial role in enhancing trauma recovery in rural African communities. Similarly, Mphuthi and Dlamini (2021) found that cooperative economic models, particularly stokvels, help survivors reduce financial dependency while promoting leadership development. Tchumba and Ngo (2022) highlight how women's solar energy cooperatives provide income opportunities, a sense of identity, and improved community safety. Research by Dutt, Grabe, and Castro (2016) on Maasai women shows that cooperative business ownership reduces partner control and increases women's autonomy in Tanzania. Kim et al. (2007) find that integrating gender training with microfinance significantly halves intimate partner violence (IPV) and boosts women's self-efficacy. Bass et al. (2013) report that group cognitive processing therapy effectively lowers PTSD symptoms in conflict-affected settings.

Ismayilova et al. (2017) combine economic programmes with gender and family coaching, which enhances survivors' independence. Tumwine et al. (2021) illustrate how mobile and digital justice technologies improve legal access for remote populations. Sarnquist et al. (2018) demonstrate that multi-component interventions that combine economic support with trauma counselling reduce IPV in urban slums. Lastly, Amondi (2021) discusses the role of digital literacy in empowering women entrepreneurs but also cautions about the risks of digital exclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that formal systems alone are inadequate for the sustained empowerment of African women survivors of violence. Durable empowerment is achieved through holistic, community-based approaches that are embedded in practice, policy, and multi-layered support systems. Aligning with the thematic findings, empowerment interventions must address psychological care through peer-led healing, economic collectives such as stokvels and solar cooperatives, integrated digital services, and culturally anchored community participation. Protecting survivors' mental health requires understanding the gendered dynamics of intimate partner violence, stigma reduction, resource provision, and survivor-centred healthcare training (Pharma, 2025). Renewable energy access, particularly through women-led solar initiatives, meets basic physiological and safety needs while opening income and leadership opportunities, mapping closely to Maslow's hierarchy by fostering safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Such integrative approaches provide not only practical benefits but also nurture identity, autonomy, and leadership.

The Family, Community, State Model for Survivor Empowerment developed in this study synthesises these findings into three interconnected layers:

- The *family layer* offers immediate emotional and material support, validating survivor experiences and fostering belonging and psychological safety.
- The *community layer* mobilises collective economic and psychosocial initiatives, reinforces cultural resilience, and connects personal recovery with social transformation.
- The *state layer* creates enabling environments through policies, justice, infrastructure, and financial support for grassroots innovations.

This conceptual framework emerged from empirical findings and literature synthesis, clarifying how survivor empowerment is most sustainable when these layers collaborate constructively, with survivors actively placed at the centre rather than being supplanted by external systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To implement sustainable empowerment based on study insights:

- Expand Community-Led Models: Support growth of stokvels, cooperatives, and mutual aid groups with survivors in leadership to enhance agency and social support.
- Prioritise Renewable Energy: Embed solar power and women-led green enterprises as pillars of safety and economic autonomy.
- Adopt Holistic Support Frameworks: Integrate financial tools with trauma-informed counselling to holistically address survivors layered psychological and economic needs.
- Institutionalise Inclusive Policy: Recognise Indigenous knowledge and survivor voices in gender-

- based violence policy design and monitoring for culturally resonant impact.
- Advance Digital Access: Develop affordable, user-friendly, solar-powered digital platforms for justice and survivor support, mindful to mitigate gender and technical inequalities.
 - Build Cross-Sector Alliances: Strengthen partnerships among survivors, traditional leaders, NGOs, and government to enhance community acceptance and programme sustainability.
 - Anchor Interventions in Ubuntu: Ground programming in relational ethics emphasizing dignity, shared responsibility, and participatory justice to navigate social tensions effectively.

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