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**Women's Self-Discovery and Empowerment: A Cornerstone towards Sustainable
Transformation**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the research was to assess the process of self-discovery and empowerment towards sustainable transformation. The study was steered by the following objectives: Evaluate the impact of counseling on self-discovery, find out an appropriate approach to unfold financial sustainability of women doing small scale businesses and develop a theory based on analyzed scenarios.

Methodology: Twenty-six case studies from poor family environment were assessed. Data was collected from mothers living in poverty, abandoned, tortured and abused by their parents and husbands. Women are living with critical physical, social, psychological and emotional wounds from their early age. Victims of all kinds of abuse, women are wounded by those who were supposed to protect and love them. Data were collected through out six years analyzing the progress of change. Counseling, trainings and seed capital have been found to be predictors of social and economic changes. Data collection tools included storytelling, individual interview, field visit- observation, focus group discussions and desk review. Analyzed case studies led to the development of Educational Healing Theory (EHT). It advocates transformative change through a series of interrelated five postulates.

Findings: Firstly, it emphasizes individual counselling to confront past trauma, empowering individuals to reject abuse and envision a better future. Secondly, group or family counselling promotes community healing, laying the foundation for social and economic transformation. Thirdly, training programmes enable communities to address barriers to development and explore new opportunities. Fourthly, providing financial resources supports the process of change. Finally, continuous monitoring ensures that progress is sustained and consolidated over time. EHT has been found to be a suitable approach which creates sustainable social and economic change as evidenced by analyzed scenarios.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Based on the findings, it is advised that stakeholders engaged in community transformation should utilize the five postulates of EHT.

Keywords: *Self-Discovery, Empowerment, Vulnerable Women, Small Scale Businesses, EHT*

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INTRODUCTION

Vulnerable women bear unspeakable and invisible suffering. Repeatedly endured, vulnerable women reach the extent of denial and unresponsiveness to fight or to take distance from their sufferings. They are considered to be natural by the victims and victimizers. Mistreated women fail to be distant from the oppressors which justify their incapacity to fight against it and make sound decision to set them free (Chefet, 2021; Atwood, 2022).

It has been documented worldwide that women aged between 15 to 49 years, one in three experienced physical and sexual abuse by their partners or none partner. In sub-Saharan Africa, 36% of women and in Eastern Africa, 38% of women were victims of physical and sexual violence from their partners and Rwanda counted 23% (WHO,2021). Even if there are other factors influencing domestic violence, poverty is foremost. Women are forced to endure the unacceptable with huge lasting consequences on their wellbeing (Barker et al. 2019; WHO, 2019; Sardinha et al, 2022).

In Rwanda, 50% of young girls are victims of physical, social, sexual, and emotional violence before 18 years. They are abused either by their parents, neighbors, teachers or friends. They are socialized, educated, harassed and subjected to a negative image of themselves. Through various researches, 60% confirmed that girls and women should tolerate violence to keep families together (Michau et al. 2015; Terry & Williams, 2021). This understanding gives power to the abusers and cannot create an equal treatment of girls and boys. Girls are emotionally and socially abused than boys. Violence of any form affects children's development and creates behavioral disorder, aggressivity, drug and alcohol abuse exposing girls to high-risk of passivity and acceptance of torture (Chernet & Cherie, 2020; Walker-Descartes et al, 2021).

A considerable number of women street vendors are from disadvantaged families dominated by domestic violence, child abuse, poverty and partners' sexual violence. They endure physical, sexual, social and emotional violence that dehumanize them to the extent of creating a positive justification to why they cannot quit the abuser. They believe that the only way of surviving is to accept positively their partners' violence. When they start small business income generation that could empower them, they do not positively progress as they are still under control of the abuser which limits their opportunities to growth (Modarresi, &Arasti, 2021). There are various researches on women empowerment and women entrepreneurs but rare are those taking into consideration vulnerable females who experienced all kinds of abuse throughout their development stages. The approaches to be applied to vulnerable females' self-discovery towards sustainable economic transformation are under researched. This research is meant to come up with an appropriate approach that could unfold the capacity of vulnerable women leading them to the social and economic development.

Regardless the effort of the Government of Rwanda to enhance gender complementarity and equity, at family level, girls and women are still subjected to men's mercy for social and economic exploitation, physical and sexual abuse and they are silenced by poverty, religious and cultural beliefs. The trauma they went through forced a negative image of themselves, underestimating their capacity to be independent (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023). The research was guided by the following objectives:

- i. Evaluate the impact of counseling on self-discovery;
- ii. Find out an appropriate approach to unfold women financial sustainability; and
- iii. Develop a theory based on analyzed scenarios.

Though several studies on women entrepreneurs and empowerment have been conducted, few studies focused on specific needs and challenges of women who endured extensive trauma and abuse (Modarresi & Arasti, 2021; Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023). The study will benefit policy makers and entire community on effective postulates that can be applied to foster peaceful families contributing to national development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is a highlight of various studies, reports and policies concerning the study. By mapping existing researches, it gives clear identification of the gap in the development of women from disadvantaged families. It is through literature review that the topic can be well framed. Theoretical and conceptual background are presented under this section.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) takes its roots in 1960s to analyze qualitative phenomenon with a critical structured practice that generates a new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) The theory finds its roots from experiences observed in six different USA hospitals (Konkle-Parker, et al. 2018; Kelley et al 2022). GT comprises four stages and a researcher who may halt at a given stage will not be able to conceptualize the theory. GT is not describing phenomenon; it has its roots in interpretivism and constructivism. Interpretivism focuses on understanding social phenomena through participants' perspectives, aiming to reveal the meanings they attach to their experiences and interactions. On the other hand, constructivism accentuates that knowledge is co-created through interactions between researchers and respondents (Edwina & McDonald, 2019).

The application of GT relies on departing from a phenomenon that exists and experiences throughout a given time and come up with a certain conclusion (Intezari & Pauleen, 2018). GT is an inductive research approach that helps to discover the reality on the field so that definitions and concepts of the discovery can be formulated (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019) The Grounded Theory approach of research is not to verify the applicability of certain functional theory.

It is rather guided by what is taking place. For the present research, *twenty-six* sampled cases of women small-scale businesses from disadvantaged families throughout four years was the basis of formulating appropriate theory of social and economic transformation. There are no articulated hypotheses; they emerge from data organized in block and constitute a theory.

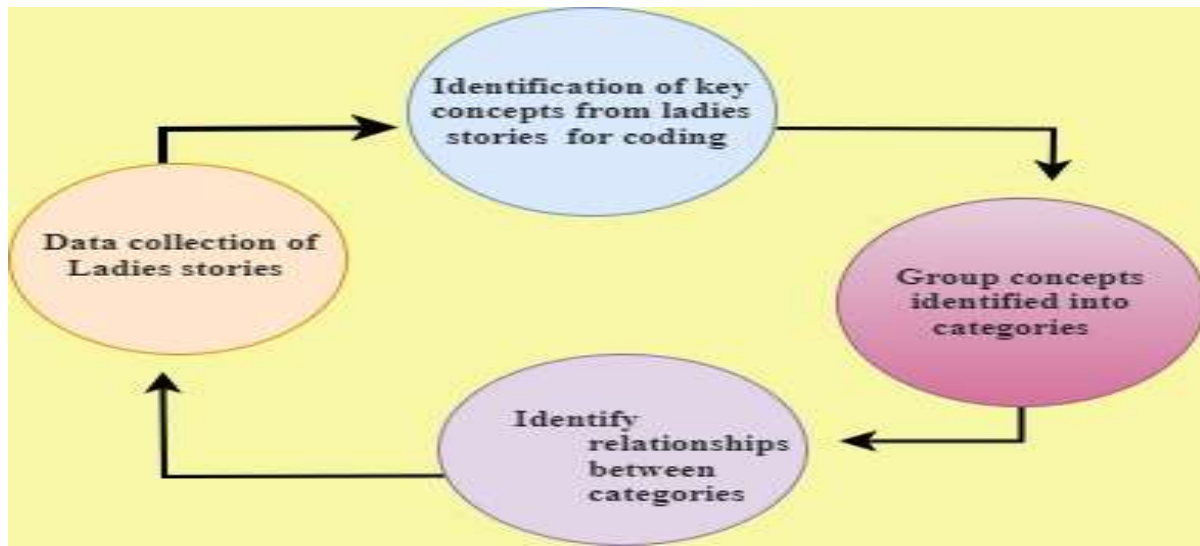


Figure 1: Stages of Grounded Theory

Empirical Review

Numerous empirical literatures reviewed underline the relationship between childhood, teenagerhood and adulthood behaviors. There are interrelated processes that form a systemic influence on social and economic success. A child who was abused is potentially an abuser of tomorrow if her/his wounds were not healed. This becomes a challenge to social and economic welfare (Allender, 2016).

Nielsen *et al.* (2018) carried out a study on a scoping review of challenges in adult intimate relationships after childhood sexual abuse. Through a desk review of 16 articles published between 2000 and 2017, findings revealed that childhood sexual abuse have repercussion on adulthood relationship and sexual satisfaction. It hinders the socio- economic development and is the basis of poor communication and lack of trust. Childhood sexual abuse impinge investment and constitutes a barrier to holistic human development.

Chernet & Cherie (2020) assessed the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women and associated factors in Ethiopia, the study was conducted in 2016. A total number of 4714 ever married women aged between 15 - 49 years in reproductive age were selected. Based on findings, 30% of women were exposed to Intimate Partners Violence. Beating, insulting and other form of violence are not considered as violence. Instead, they are characterized as a way of shaping, educating a woman's behavior. Subjected to all kinds of violence, poverty, lower level of education or uneducated aggravated their trauma. Abandoned or divorced women in the age range of 25- 39 years are more exposed to sexual violence with serious short and long-term physical, mental, social and economic consequences.

Bazubagira & Umumararungu (2023) analyzed challenges deterring the progress of women small-scale entrepreneurs in Rwanda. Using quantitative analysis, 109 women who have been running small- scale businesses from one to three years were sampled. Data were collected using questionnaire and desk review. Among challenges frightening the progress of women businesses are financial illiteracy (100%), poverty (100%), family conflicts (93.6%), drunkenness (67%) and

family expenses (53.2%). Losing confidence in themselves, not being able to assess the progress of their businesses, not being supported by their partners, depression that has pushed them into drunkenness and irresponsibility were pointed out as barriers of social and economic progress of small-scale women entrepreneurs.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a longitudinal design where researchers assessed twenty-six women grouped into five scenarios, including eight, one, four, seven and six respondents respectively. They were located in four Districts of Rwanda that are Kicukiro, Gasabo, Rwamagana and Ngoma and selected using purposive sampling (Pandey & Pandey 2021). Scenarios were analyzed throughout a period of six years (2018 - 2023). Data were collected through storytelling, individual interview, field visit-observation, focus group discussion and desk review. The later assessed counseling files and reports that facilitated researchers to deeply analyze their progressive changes (Gupta & Gupta, 2022).

Data Collection

The section points out data related to women’s self-discovery and empowerment, a cornerstone towards sustainable transformation.

Scenario One

Abandoned by her father at very early age, Jey with her brothers and sisters were raised up by their mother who struggled alone to take that huge responsibility. Later on, she also abandoned them. Rejected by her family and illiterate, Jep decided to quit the rural area and went to her old sister’s home in Kigali. Her situation deteriorated and become a house girl in her old sister’s home at 9 years. She endured physical, social and emotional abuse. She decided to escape her old sister’s home by the help of a friend who was chocked by her situation and went to work as a house girl elsewhere.

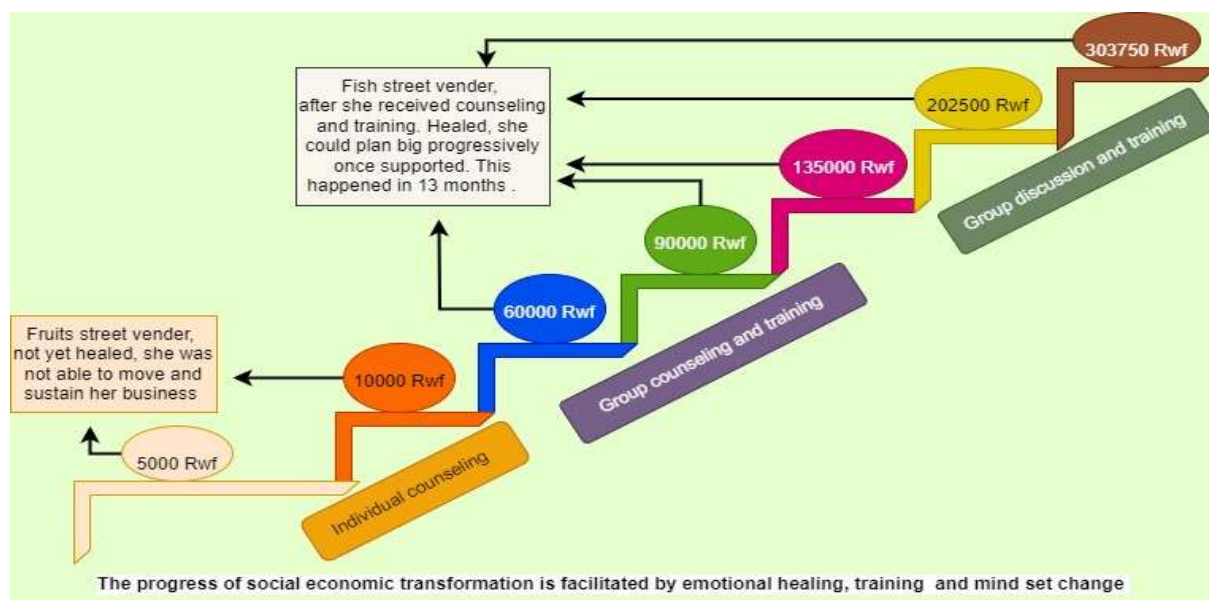


Figure 2: Curve of Progressive Changes

At seventeen years, she was locked into a house and sexually abused by a thirty-one years man. Impregnated, the responsible disappeared till the time she reported the case to a family where she was a house girl. They forced him to marry her as a way of escaping the punishment once reported. She accepted to marry him trying to find out a solution to her misery. The situation was worsened by domestic and sexual violence, physical, social and emotional abuse. Local leaders, family members and friends tried to get involved in resolving the conflict. They tried several times but in vain. The husband left her with three daughters in 2017. Traumatized and unable to move forward, she was advised to go through counseling. Healed, she developed resilience to move from street vender to a stable commercial place. Seven women from the analyzed group of 26 have similar stories which differs in details.

Scenario Two

Born and raised up in a dysfunctional family dominated by domestic violence, Jug became responsible at teenager age when her mother was chased out from home. She hardly completed high school. Afterwards, she got a fiancé and started preparing herself for marriage. Unfortunately, she got an accident and was seriously injured. Her fiancé abandoned and rejected her. This was Jug’s second wound; it was very hard to figure out the way forward. She cohabitated with a husband and lived with him for a few months and accidentally disappeared when she got the first pregnancy.

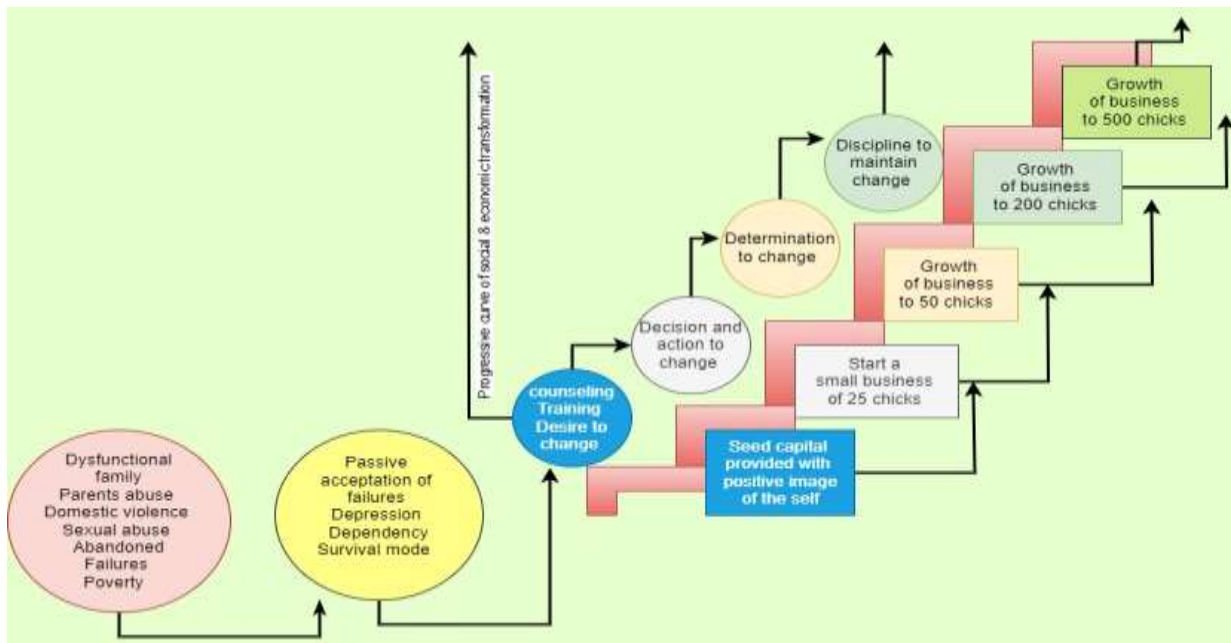


Figure 3: Curve of Successful Positive Changes

Extremely wounded and living in poverty, she was not successful in whatever she tried and admitted that she was born to suffer and cannot succeed in her life. The justification behind was rooted in her depression. After going through several counseling sessions, she got back the sense of hope for future opportunities. Jug is now moving on with positive progress. She started with 25 chicks; now she has reached 500. The progress of healing equates the progress of economic transformation towards improving the wellbeing. She is differently interpreting her past not being

a barrier to her progress. She is not imprisoned by the past; she considers counseling as a transformational school from wounded past to new developmental opportunities.

Scenario Three

Born and raised from a poor family, rejected, abused and tortured by her mother, Jap was forced by her mother to abandon studies and became guardian of her young sisters and brothers when she was six years old. Mistreated and tired, she decided to escape her mother when she was twelve years and went to work as a house girl. Jup was hypnotized by the fear of her toxic mother that she accepted to work and the total payment was given to her mother. Jup naively accepted the hard situation she endured and considered it as normal lifestyle without any resilience. Everywhere she was, she could feel the presence of the mother controlling her abidingly. When she decided to go back home assuming that her mother could be happy, she was beaten, discriminated, tortured and wrongly accused to be a prostitute. Homeless, Jug was sexually abused by a person who provided her with accommodation. Few months later, Jug went to Hospital and tested pregnant and HIV positive. Later on, she was employed and sexually abused and impregnated by her direct supervisor. When Jug informed him about the pregnancy, he assisted her but due to depression, shame and fear about her future. The depression led her to become a drunker, using the little money received from the father of her second child which pushed him to stop his support.

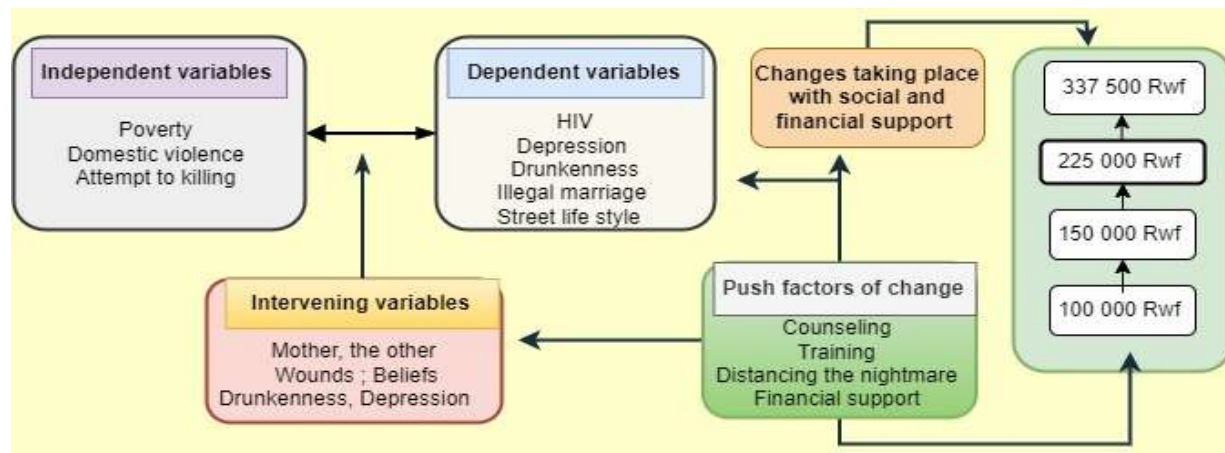


Figure 4: Trajectory of Sustainable Changes

Thereafter, Jug found a man who accepted her as an HIV positive, with two children but he was another abuser coming into her life who violently traumatized her. Throughout that cruel environment, she gave birth to two children in addition to her first two children that is, she had four children all together. Her husband attempted to kill her and she survived that attempt with very serious physical and emotional wounds. Tortured since her early childhood by her mother, friends, relatives and husband, she was locked into the nightmares of the past and her financial was not possible. After receiving counseling sessions, she understood her passivity in accepting tortures. This enlightened to discover her identity and assimilating herself to the abuser. Counseling unlocked her capacity to look beyond the past and started moving towards success. She is now fighting to become self- reliant. Among twenty-six women, three of them have stories which are alike.

Scenario Four

Born in a loving family, Jil legally got married at the age of twenty-six years. Five years later, her husband developed misbehaviors including drunkenness and infidelity which ended by cohabitating with a concubine. He later on left her with three children who were strongly affected by the situation. Depressed and in poor situation, she was wounded and decided to take her children to their grandmother so that they can at least get food. The last child was born into a tragic period of domestic violence when the husband was no more sleeping at home. Living in extreme poverty and depression, one of her four children became a street child and the situation was getting worse.

After going through counseling sessions in 2021, she discovered that what she went through was not the end and that it could be the beginning of a new era. She decided to start a farming opportunity with the seed capital received from Amahoro Builders.

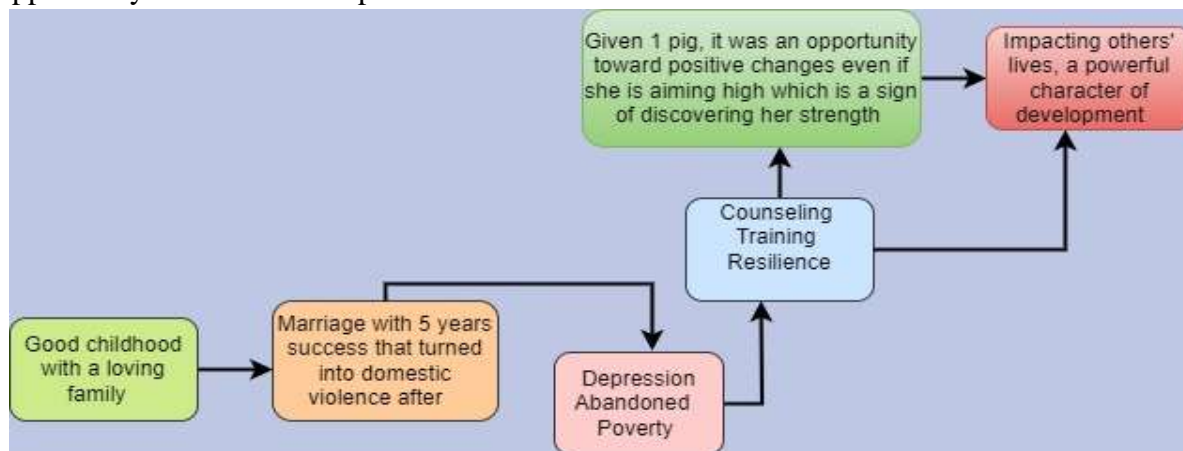


Figure 5: Progress of Changes

After six months, she was very active and decided to coach two other young ladies and two teenagers' part of her counseling group which is a sign of understanding others' sufferings and complete healing. There is a group of six women from sampled respondents who share the same wounds.

Scenario five

Born in a very poor family, Jom was abused since the very early age. A house girl at 14 years, she was impregnated by a night watchman and could not continue working. Abandoned, she became a prostitute as a survival mode and gave birth to five children from four different fathers.

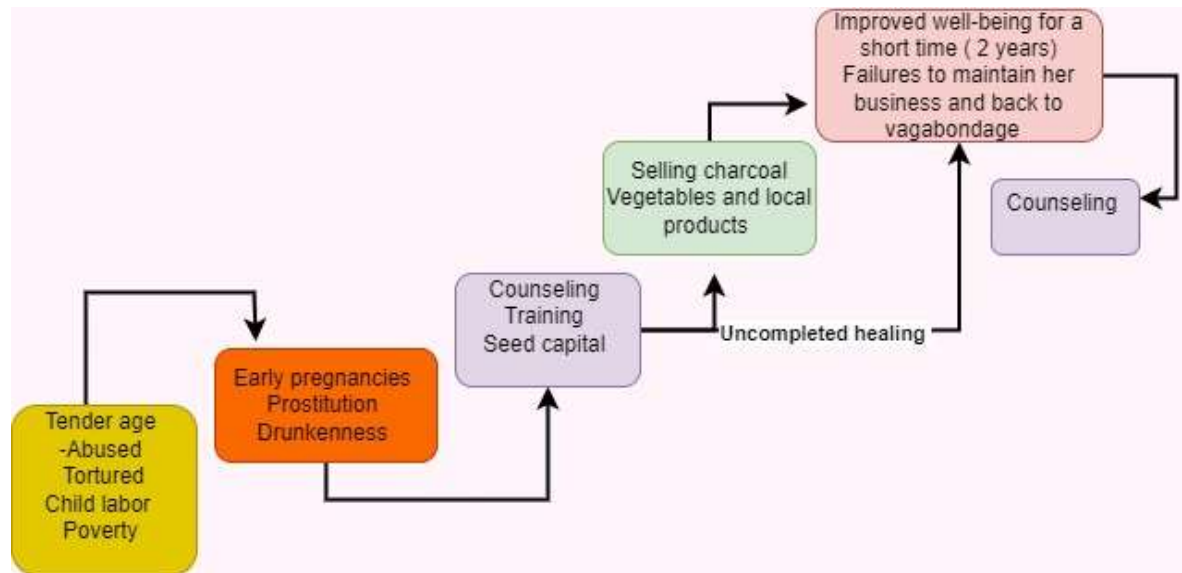


Figure 6: Zigzag in Process of Change

Two of her children adopted street life style which accentuated her depression. She started counseling but halted in the middle of the healing process when she received training and seed capital from Amahoro Builders to sell charcoals and other local products. Instead of maintaining decision to change, she started hiding. Improved living conditions were observed at the beginning but lasted only two years. This situation is common to five respondents who participated in this study. They did not abandon prostitution and drunkenness; the progress of change and empowerment was interrupted by their behaviors and could not progress.

Identified Commonalities among Scenarios

From twenty-six sampled respondents, twenty of them have completed planned counseling sessions and were rehabilitated. They have undergone trainings in income-generating activities for small businesses. Four of the analyzed scenarios had one or two street children who were successfully transformed and reintegrated in their respective families and schools. One scenario who discontinued counseling had street children who were not fully reintegrated. Their mothers' behaviors had impacted on their process of change and upholding achieved outcomes which were not straightforward. All five scenarios were provided with seed capital from Amahoro Builders in order to contribute to their financial empowerment.

Those who fully recovered were able to effectively utilize the received seed capital whereas those who did not were unable to do so. Women tend to passively accept their misfortune, suffering, poverty and sexual violence and male dominance. Those born and raised in family environment characterized by domestic violence and poverty are likely to live unconsciously with the legacy of their past.



Figure 7: Identification and Grouping Key Concepts

It is only when they are offered counseling that they are able to grieve for the past and move on from their traumatic experiences, allowing them to start a different lifestyle. Of the five analyzed scenarios, only one was not abused during childhood or adolescence. They rather experienced domestic violence, social and emotional abuse in their marriage. The remaining four analyzed scenarios were characterized by various forms of abuse throughout their childhood, teenager age and adulthood including their marriages. Conclusively, the progress of rehabilitated women who benefited from counseling sessions, trainings and seed capital, their socio-economic transformation is promising.

Educational Healing Theory (EHT)

Generated from analyzed scenarios over a period of five years, Educational Healing Theory (EHT) states that socio-economic transformation cannot take place when wounded individuals are still unlocked in their past traumatic situations. It is a new approach of promoting sustainable transformation among vulnerable people but for the present study, the focus was on women. The theory was generated from revisiting their past stories throughout their childhood, teenagerhood and adulthood to name the unspeakable and invisible violence endured which were key causes of their traumatic memories. It is necessary that tackling their vulnerability would start with 'in-person' individual approach to initially deal with the self-discovery. Thereafter, creating an environment where the self and the other meet to exchange, discuss, understand and uncover positive image of self and others. The nightmare of the past is unlocked by counseling where by the past is not understood as a prison where to sit and passively accept its negative effects. It is rather a school, a challenging learning environment that inspires today's determination and discipline that would help them navigate into their achievements. The survival mode in which women are used to does not allow them to look beyond and plan accordingly as if vulnerability and poverty is a legacy. Unlocking women's social capability would also be the beginning of sustainable economic change.

Educational Healing Theory (EHT) is an approach that promotes change starting by *in-person transformation* through counseling. Digging into the past traumatic memory, identifying the

strengths and weaknesses towards discovering opportunities and fight against threats is the first postulate of EHT.

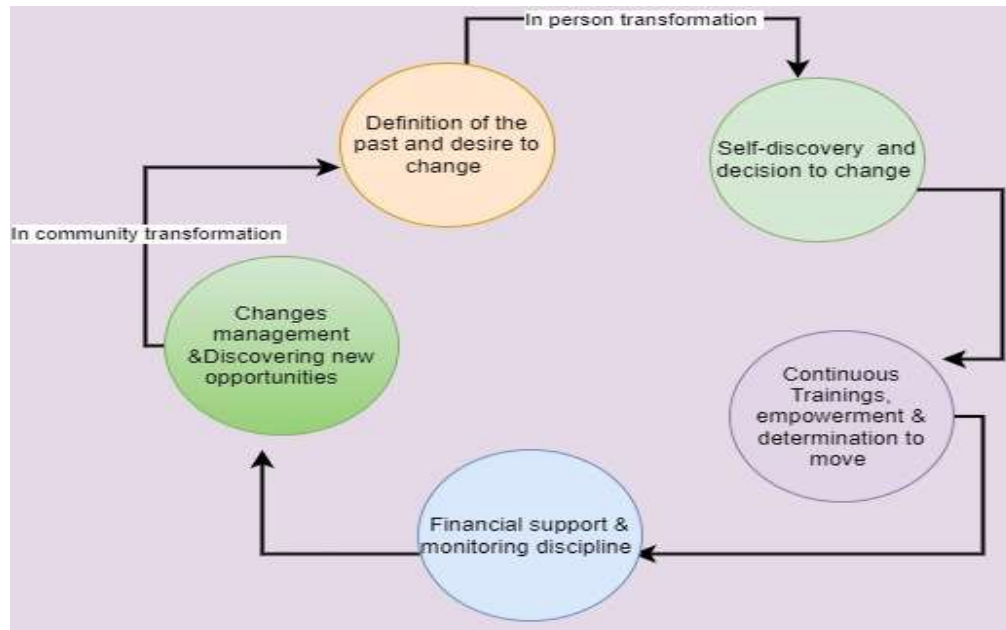


Figure 8: Educational Healing Theory (EHT) Model

This is the beginning of refusal of tortures, violence, sexual, social, physical and emotional abuse and consider it as intolerable environment to fight against. The second postulate of EHT is a *group or family counseling* to demystify the image of the other, the beginning of family and community healing for social and economic transformation. The third postulate of EHT is *training* where families and community are trained on various topics identified by themselves to be a hindrance to their development as well as available opportunities to be explored. The fourth postulate is the *seed capital* that supplements the process of change. The fifth postulate is *continuous monitoring* of change to consolidate the achievement. Educational Healing Theory (EHT) can be criticized to be time consuming. It is a challenge that can be observed at the beginning but is worthy through other stages as changes are happening in the community. In-person social and emotional healing shapes family changes and empowers developmental decisions. This foundational change gives value to women's lifestyle including openness to various opportunities likely to promote their children's education and refusal to be passively abused. Eager to see changes taking place in their lives and families, women change their ways of thinking and living.

Conclusion

Educational Healing Theory (EHT) model suggests a comprehensive framework to integrate community education practices with healing processes. EHT provides a holistic approach to education that addresses both cognitive and emotional needs. This model nurtures a supportive environment where family members can flourish holistically. Its application leads to transformative outcomes promoting integral well-being. Adopting EHT helps in creating more resilient and empowered families leading to their long-term success and growth.

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