

Research Paper

Impact of a Life Skills Education Package on Improving the Cognitive-behavioral Abilities of Marginalized Women

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Background: A significant number of marginalized women lacked confidence, communication skills, and assertiveness. The aim of this study was to assess the impact of our previously developed life skills educational package for marginalized women on enhancing their cognitive-behavioral abilities.

Methods: A qualitative-focused interview was conducted from June 2021 to May 2023. Selected marginalized women were living in the peripheral areas of Isfahan, Tehran, Zahedan, and Mashhad. The teaching package focuses on active learning methods and provides a three-month training course for self-awareness skills, effective communication, and emotional regulation, which includes two booklets: A teacher's guide and a workbook. Samples were selected using purposeful sampling with an emphasis on "intensity." The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the MaxQDA software, version 2020.

Results: The study was completed by 41 women, with a mean age of 25.3 ± 3.9 years. The training course improved the participants' abilities in self-awareness, effective communication, and effective emotion regulation. Training in self-awareness led to better self-understanding, increased self-esteem, a new perspective on life, and improved cognitive patterns. In the domain of effective communication, it resulted in enhanced social perception, improved social skills, and better interpersonal relationships. Regarding emotional regulation, it fostered emotional awareness, efficient selection of coping strategies, and better anger management.

Conclusion: The educational package based on life skills can effectively improve the cognitive-behavioral abilities of marginalized women. Empowering marginalized women resulted in a better quality of life for families in the regions and acted as a significantly positive supportive factor in preventing mental-social injuries.

Keywords: Marginalization, Life skills, Self-awareness skills, Communication skills, Emotional regulation

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Introduction

Marginalization refers to the social process, through which certain groups or individuals are pushed to the edges or margins of society, often resulting in their exclusion from meaningful participation in social, economic, or political activities. Marginalization in Iran, which has been exacerbated since the 1940s by land reforms and rural-urban migration, now affects over 19 million people in the country's marginal areas [1]. Marginalized populations face significant challenges, including mental health issues due to isolation, poverty, low literacy levels, cultural conflicts, and discrimination. They lack access to educational and employment opportunities, government support, and influential social networks, trapping them in cycles of deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion [2, 3].

Experts recommend focusing on cultural factors, mental health, self-esteem, identity, job opportunities, and access to services to improve marginalized people's quality of life and mental health. Engaging in cultural activities is especially beneficial for enhancing psychosocial well-being and combating poverty and social exclusion [4]. The life skills training program is defined by the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) as the ability to adapt along with positive behaviors that prepare people to effectively overcome the challenges and events of daily life [5]. Psychological empowerment is the process of helping individuals improve their sense of capability and worth, enabling them to overcome feelings of inadequacy and desperation [6].

The review of previous studies showed that training aimed at improving skills and psychological empowerment can be useful for residents in marginal areas [7, 8]. Regarding the effectiveness of life skills training programs, several limited studies have been conducted on different groups, especially women. Pursalman and Asgharanjad found life-skill training effective in enhancing aggression management and resilience among adolescents [9]. Baradaran Eftekhari et al. highlighted the critical impact of mental health among married women, emphasizing the importance of spiritual strengthening, stress management skills, positive thinking, and seeking consultation in Tehran [10].

However, the researcher did not find a package specifically written for this group examining the process of its influence on improving the cognitive-behavioral abilities of women living in marginal areas. The present study aimed to fill the gap in research concerning both

the general public and marginalized communities within society. Previously, we made a training package for the improvement of individual skills. A panel of experts and health activists evaluated the content validity of the educational package using a five-point Likert scale. All ratings fell within the highest two categories (4 and 5), indicating high validity. The relative content validity coefficient was 0.714 [11].

The life skills training program, which aims to improve the cognitive-behavioral abilities of marginalized women in the current study, was extracted from this context. Certain cities and neighborhoods were selected based on accessibility as deprived communities lacking adequate resources and opportunities. Emigration, low literacy levels, renting, and low economic status were common characteristics of these neighborhoods. The patriarchal atmosphere and minimal involvement of women in decision-making processes were evident. Women exhibited weaknesses in communication skills and a noticeable lack of attention to and importance placed on their own needs. The researchers sought to answer the question of how the training package for improving individual skills can improve the cognitive-behavioral abilities (self-awareness skills, effective communication, and emotion regulation) of the marginal population.

Methods

The research method employed was a qualitative-focused interview and thematic content analysis. Participants aged 20-30, with at least a fifth-grade education, residing in marginalized areas of the city. The participants were living in neighborhoods 30 meters above Shahr-e Qods in Tehran, Jahed City in Mashhad, Shirabad in Zahedan, and Arzenan in Isfahan, and they had participated in training classes to improve individual skills.

The educational package included two booklets for the instructor and the subject, which are taught by the facilitators through active learning and workshops for three months in weekly training sessions. The focus is on teaching self-awareness, effective communication skills, and emotional regulation skills.

Intensity sampling, also known as purposive or judgmental sampling, involves deliberately selecting participants or cases with specific characteristics of interest in qualitative research. This method allows researchers to focus on individuals who can provide the most relevant insights related to their research questions. Samples were selected using purposeful sampling with an emphasis on "intensity." The sample size was determined by theoreti-

cal saturation. In this study, 41 out of 60 participants in the skills training course were selected through intensity sampling to investigate the impact of the training package on skill improvement and to explore participants' lived experiences [12].

To comply with ethical guidelines, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. They were assured that their information would remain confidential, and only the first letter of the interviewees' names would be used to reference them in the research.

Data collection

The data collection method was a semi-structured individual-focused interview. This study was conducted from June 2021 to May 2023. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each, conducted in person and by phone, depending on the participants' conditions during the course. The interview protocol was designed based on the study's goals and research questions. This protocol consisted of four parts: "Starting text", "questions", "clues" and "ending text" [13]. The questions were posed using the Socratic method and in several stages. After explaining the reason for conducting the interview, the participants were asked to briefly discuss their lives. Then, they were asked to talk about their lived experiences during the three-month training course. Finally, questions were asked in a Socratic manner, from the whole to the parts, regarding how self-awareness skills, effective communication skills, and emotion regulation skills affect their lives. The framework designed for the interview questions was as follows:

- How is your relationship with yourself now?
- Have you felt some changes in yourself during this time?
- How about the rest of your relationships?
- How is your relationship with your children?
- How is your relationship with your wife?
- How is your relationship with your relatives?
- Do you see any changes in regulating your emotions?
- Can you give an example?

To ensure accuracy, at the end of the interview, the researcher read a summary of what the interviewee said to the participant, and after confirming or correcting the statements, the interview was concluded.

After collecting data through individual-focused interviews, the interviews were conducted objectively. To analyze the data, the step-by-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke was employed [14].

This process consists of six main steps: 1) Getting to know the data; 2) Generating initial codes; 3) Searching for themes (converting primary codes to themes); 4) Reviewing themes (this step leads to drawing a network of themes); 5) Defining themes (thematic analysis); and 6) Producing the report. The researcher extracted and drafted the codes based on the interviews and considered all the speakers' statements to ensure that the codes were an accurate summary of the text. The coding process was done by the main researcher and the obtained information was reviewed by the supervisor and the consultant.

According to the thematic analysis steps, interviews were first conducted, recorded, and implemented. After repeatedly reviewing the data, according to the research questions, the coding process began. In the third stage, themes were formed by analyzing and finally combining different codes. Then, by categorizing, combining, and summarizing the obtained themes, the thematic network was drawn. The thematic network was constructed based on basic concepts or sub-categories (codes and key points of the text), organizing themes or categories (obtained by combining and summarizing basic themes), and overarching themes (including the principles governing the text as a whole). Then, web pages were formed using these themes, and the prominent themes of each of these three levels along with the relationships between them were indicated [14, 15]. Figure 1 shows the diagram of categories, main categories, and their relationships.

Finally, Lincoln and Gaba's scientific criteria were used to confirm the results [16]. Therefore, the reliability, verifiability, dependability, and transferability of the data were verified based on the peer-group review method. To ensure the validity of the qualitative analysis, the results of each interview were given to the participant so that the accuracy of the analysis could be confirmed and modified if necessary. Table 1 shows the main categories, categories, themes, and their frequency.

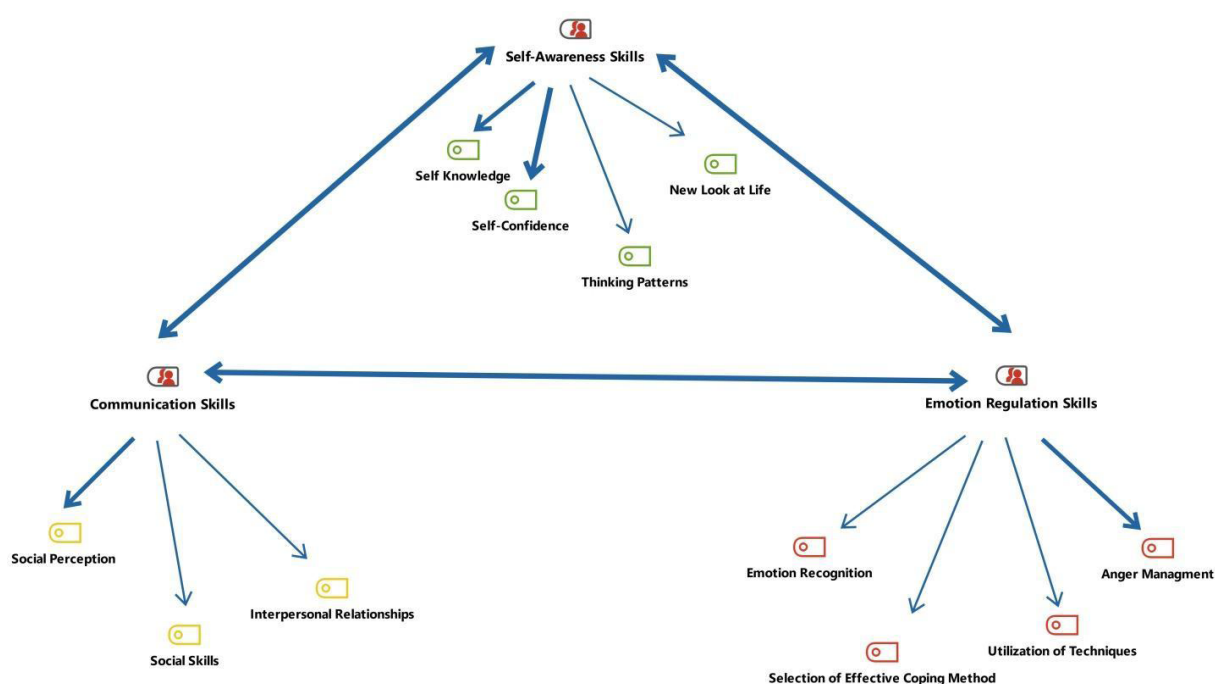


Figure 1. Diagram of categories, main categories, and their relationships



Data analysis

The data coding and analysis were done by MAXQDA software, version 2020. This software facilitated the seamless input of interview results, ensuring that all data were efficiently organized and accessible for analysis. The categories included: Main categories, subcategories, and concepts; subsequently, tables and figures were created.

Results

The sample size included 41 women, with a mean age of 25.3 ± 3.9 years. Of these participants, 16 were between the ages of 20 and 25, while 25 were between the ages of 26 and 30. Regarding education, eight individuals had education up to the fifth grade, 18 had education below a diploma, and 13 had a diploma or higher. Regarding marital status, seven participants were single, 31 were married, and three were divorced. Meanwhile, nine subjects were from the Jahed neighborhood in Mashhad City, Iran, ten people were from the Zainbiyeh neighborhood in Isfahan City, ten people were from the neighborhood of 30 Metri Balaye Qods in Tehran City, and 12 people were from the Shirabad neighborhood in Zahedan City, Iran.

The participants in the current qualitative research on self-awareness skills mentioned topics such as knowing oneself, increasing self-esteem, correcting thought pat-

terns, and finding a new outlook on life. These categories are the result of combining and summarizing a series of concepts. All these concepts center around individual skills, which lead to the improvement of people's cognitive-behavioral abilities and ultimately enhance their mental-social health and quality of life.

During the interviews, the growth of certain aspects of the "ego" was evident in the participants' conversations. "Ego" is one of the most important layers of each person's personality and includes actions and reactions in which I, myself, or myself are prominent [17]. An underdeveloped ego is very self-centered and selfish; such individuals have no desire to acknowledge their mistakes and often avoid confronting them. In this educational and co-learning process, people had the opportunity to view themselves more realistically and engage in self-criticism by gaining a better understanding of themselves, reflecting on their actions, recognizing their mistakes, and changing their behavior.

As a 27-year-old named "M" from Tehran said: "When we were discussing with people in class, I could see that our views on a subject were very different. I learned there that I can think better, I can behave better, I'm not always right, and I can make mistakes too. Similarly, "Z", who was 28 years old, married, and living in Tehran, said: "I used to think that my wife's faults were mine. I saw my wife's faults a lot and thought I was better. But then I also

Table 1. Main categories, categories, themes, and their frequency

Main Categories	Categories	Themes
Individual skills intervention package	Consequences of teaching using the active learning method	Recommending the class to others
		Interest in studying and learning
		Effectiveness of the course
		Vicarious training
		Creating a sense of intimacy
Improving emotion regulation skills	Emotions identification	Participation
		Recognizing the symptoms of emotions
		Naming emotions
		Predictive power
	Choosing an effective coping method	Waiting
		The response instead of reaction
		Postponement of reaction
		Avoiding ineffective action
	Anger management skills	Self-control
		Stress reduction
		Calming down
		Use of techniques
		Recommendation to others
Improving effective communication skills	Promotion of social perception	Understanding others
		Reducing the imposition of comments
		Respect for others
		Diminishing the effect of people's words
		Trusting others
		Avoiding blame
		Understanding the situation
		Questioning
		Impact on Communication Space
		Daring
	Promotion of social skills	Talking to each other
		Accuracy in body language
		Non-judgment
		Listening skills
		Speaking skills

Main Categories	Categories	Themes
Improving effective communication skills	Improving interpersonal relationships	Changing behavior with others
		Getting along with others
		Improving emotional relationships with others
		Improving emotional relationships with spouse
		Improving emotional relationships with children
Improving self-awareness skills	Knowing yourself	Self-reflection
		Seeing your mistakes
		Demarcation
		Awareness of your behavior
		Changing the behavior of oneself
	Self-esteem	Self-confidence
		Increasing self-confidence
		Valuing yourself
		Loving yourself
		Independence
		Self-respect
		Self-acceptance
		Changes in the type of attitude
		Planning
		Optimism
	Finding a new look at life	Acceptance of terms
		Understanding the difference in views
		Thinking
		Recognizing the thought pattern
Improving thought patterns		Realistic perception
		Modifying the thought pattern

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saw my own flaws”..... Also, “R” who was 25 years old from Zahedan said: “I have a sister who used to come and say bad things about my mother-in-law and I would get angry. I would tell her to leave me alone, that I’m not in the mood; you always cause wars and arguments. But now I say, well, she doesn’t know what to say, what not to say, and how to speak. Now I’ll explain to her what effect her words have on me and some things she

shouldn’t say. In addition, “Z” in Tehran said: “A lady in the class said that I am arrogant.” I recognized that, so, I will say my negative aspects. We don’t only have good points; we can also write about bad things. All people have negative characteristics and flaws. I have to work on myself a bit, and then I can also see my own negative characteristics.”

On the other hand, these training sessions were effective in increasing self-confidence, self-confidence, self-valuing, self-respect, independence, and self-acceptance. They provided individuals with the opportunity to become aware of their ineffective thought patterns and schemas and to correct them. “M” from Mashhad said, “Before, I couldn’t talk in a group at all, but in this class, I saw that people talk easily. I told myself that I had something I wanted to say, and I started talking.

“Far” from Zahedan said: “I am not the same person anymore; my self-confidence has increased, and I can speak and comment in public. When they wanted to talk in the class meetings, I couldn’t at first, then gradually I was able to speak and comment in the group. Since the day I realized that I am the priority, I have reached out to myself more and shown myself more in public. “Z” from Tehran said: “Before, it was very important for me to have a university education; a degree was important to me. But now, I understand that literacy is important, and university education has nothing to do with literacy. My self-esteem has increased and I have accepted myself. I am in a good position and I don’t blame myself anymore.” “Z” talked about the challenge with a conditional belief in herself; believing that: “I am good when I have a university degree.” She explained that she has diminished the degree of certainty associated with this belief, and as a result, she has been able to accept herself better than before, improve her self-esteem, and stop blaming herself.

Based on the interviews, the researcher extracted four categories for effective communication skills: Improving social perception, improving social skills, and improving interpersonal relationships, which were obtained by combining and summarizing a series of concepts.

The findings indicated that people changed their social perception during this course and could act differently in their relationships with others. The interviewees admitted that in challenging communication situations, they pay attention to both the physical and mental conditions of others as well as their positions and conditions. In other words, people learn to accept the responsibility of taking care of others in interpersonal relationships. In this regard, “S” from Zahedan who was 29 years old said: “Now, if I have to discuss an important issue with my husband or if I am unhappy about something, I don’t bring it up when I see that he is tired and has come home from work. I wait and I tell him at a suitable time, but it was not like this before; for example, if I was unhappy with something, as soon as my husband came home from work, I would say that this happened today, and he

would fight because he was tired., “A” talked about her reduced tendency to impose her own will on others: “I used to want to change my parents-in-law; I would say to myself, why do they talk and laugh behind my back? But when I go there, they get upset and distance themselves from me. Now I understand that it’s not like that. My sister-in-law is introverted and doesn’t talk much, so I have to take the initiative and start the conversation with them myself. The more I distance myself, the worse the situation gets. I told myself that I can’t change them, and I can’t expect them to be the way I want; people are different.

The subjects admitted that their social skills improved and they were able to influence the atmosphere of their relationships with others. They were less judgmental and practiced active listening and speaking skills, and their courage increased. “M” from Tehran said: “My husband tells me that this class not only made you calm down but also reduced some of my stress and calmed me down when I was under pressure”..... For example, he had a cheque, that was due to be paid soon and he didn’t have enough money and he was very worried. I told him not to worry, we would pass it, there are still three days left, and I am sure you will find a way. My husband looked at me with surprise and said, “Is it you?” “R,” who is 26 years old and from Mashhad, said, “After these classes, I have a better understanding of my situation. If there is a dispute in the family, I mediate and help calm them down. Now my sister’s son-in-law calls and consults with me. Yes, I have grown, my speech has improved, and I can understand most of the time”.

In addition, “F” who was 30 years old from Tehran City, Iran, maintained the following opinion about increasing his courage: “My family is Kurdish, my husband confronts many behaviors. For example, he says that a woman should not make many decisions in her life and should have control over everything. However, after this class, I influenced my husband’s behavior to the extent that I now have the right to give my opinion and make decisions about my life and my children, as well as how to control my life.

In terms of improving interpersonal relationships, “M” who was 23 years old from Isfahan City, Iran, said, “Previously, when my son woke up late in the morning, I used to shout at him, but now I sit next to him and gently wake him up. My son tells me that this is much better. Where are you going for this change?”

Based on the collected information from the interviews, four categories of recognizing emotions, choosing an effective coping method, and anger management skills were extracted for emotion regulation skills. During the interviews with the participants, they paid more attention to the signs of emotions they experienced compared to before and were able to name their emotions. For instance, “A” from Zahedan said, “The majority of my time in my previous life was spent in anger; I would turn red and my blood would boil and my heart would race. I did not know why I was like this. Since I studied these lessons, I know that this state is called anger.”

Meanwhile, “F” who was 29 years old from Zahedan City, said, “I used to get angry quickly and sometimes shout and hit my children. After taking these classes, I realize that I am angry in the moment of anger. Now, when I get angry, I remember my teacher’s words for a moment and say to myself, ‘You are angry now; do not react.’”

Meanwhile, the participants talked about using anger management techniques in their statements. For instance, “A” from Isfahan said, “There is something inside me and there are words in my brain that deeply upset me. I write them on paper, crumple them, and throw them away or burn them to get those thoughts out of my mind and calm myself. Now, when I get angry, I wash the dishes, go out, or listen to music.” “Kh” from Zahedan stated, “Before attending this class, I struggled to know how to handle my anger. Now, I’ve learned effective strategies, such as amusing myself with activities, like painting, folding clothes, or finding something engaging to do.”

Discussion

The life skills training program has attracted the attention of researchers, specialists, and organizations in charge of community health. Various researchers have investigated the effects of this intervention in different groups. Some studies have paid attention to its preventive effect [18]. In addition, some articles have considered the role of education in improving mental health indicators [19]. The present study investigated the aspect of improvement of cognitive-behavioral abilities.

On the other hand, some studies have found no significant impact of this program in certain areas. For instance, Poursharifi et al., in a study of the teaching of life skills to female students in 9th grade and above and its impact on social skills, found that while teaching these skills led to a decrease in the level of impulsivity among students in the experimental group compared to the control group, there was no significant change in other factors [20].

A crucial aspect of the program is tailoring the training to the specific needs of the target group. Similar to Muruganantham’s study [21], this project emphasized understanding these needs through an initial analysis phase. The needs assessment revealed that effective communication and self-awareness skills were top priorities. This aligns with findings from Fathi and Bagherzadeh [22], who highlighted the importance of communication skills for social security in marginalized communities.

The training demonstrably enhanced self-awareness in participants. This finding aligns with research by Yahyazadehjolodar et al. [23] who connected self-awareness training with increased responsibility and identification in students. Similarly, Sagon et al. [24] found a link between self-efficacy and resilience factors, like adaptability and competence. Youths who perceived themselves as efficient in problem-solving and empathy exhibited greater flexibility. Furthermore, Machmud and Indrapriyatna [25] suggest that life skills training, which likely improves self-awareness, can reduce the risk of pregnancy in teenagers. The present study observed increased confidence and self-respect among participants, mirroring the findings of Mansuri [26] who showed that life skills training enhances decision-making potential in marginalized students. Law & Rowe’s research [27] further emphasizes the positive impact of self-awareness on social performance.

The training also proved effective in improving communication skills. This aligns with studies by Momeni-javid et al. [28] and Animasahun & Oladeni [29] who demonstrated the positive impact of communication skills training on personal well-being and marital satisfaction, respectively. Sabba et al. [30] also found a favorable level of communication skills among university students, suggesting the potential for further improvement through targeted interventions.

The study found that the training program enhanced emotion regulation skills. Mirzaei and Hasani’s research [31] supports this finding, demonstrating that life skills training can lead to a decrease in negative coping mechanisms, like self-blame and rumination, while promoting positive strategies, like acceptance and refocusing. Similarly, Lee et al. [32] showed that life skills training improved cognitive re-evaluation in students, potentially reducing depressive symptoms in men. Berking et al. [33] further highlight the connection between emotion regulation skills and reduced depression severity. Khosravi and Aghajani [34] reported that life skills training can improve self-efficacy, hope, and resilience, all of which contribute to better emotional well-being.

Singla et al.'s meta-analysis [35] aligns with the present study's findings, suggesting that youth life skills programs can improve various mental health factors. The program's positive impact on self-awareness and communication skills likely contributes to this overall improvement. These findings resonate with Nurasyiah et al.'s work on family empowerment [36]. Empowered women have greater control over resources and can navigate family decision-making more effectively. Kabeer's theory of empowerment [37] emphasizes the importance of choices related to marriage, childbearing, and family finances. Family empowerment can also lead to improved conflict resolution and a more positive family environment [38].

Safari and Mirzaei's study [39] on marginalized girls highlights the presence of "limiting beliefs" that can hinder their growth. The current research suggests that educational packages designed for marginalized women, delivered through active learning methods, can address these limiting beliefs and empower women to reach their full potential.

We believe that such training, in the short term, can assist individuals in achieving better and healthier self-control and relationship management. In the long term, it may also contribute to reducing the increasing trends of divorce, suicide, depression, violence, and interpersonal conflicts. The lack of educational and cultural learning opportunities, along with insufficient attention to the improvement of skills, exacerbates social and cultural differences both among the residents of marginalized areas and in comparison to their neighbors. This situation increases the responsibility of the government and experts to address this issue and to develop operational plans aimed at enhancing education, promoting mental health, and preventing psychosocial injuries within this segment of society.

In this research, due to the lack of facilities, the study was conducted in a limited number of cities and regions. The study focused merely on women with at least a fifth-grade education. As a result, men and illiterate people were deprived of this education.

Conclusion

The research results indicate that participants in the course experienced significant developments in various aspects. In terms of self-awareness, they reported improvements, such as better self-understanding and enhanced self-esteem. In effective communication skills, participants noted enhancements in social perception and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, in emotion

regulation skills, participants acknowledged substantial improvements in recognizing emotions, employing effective coping strategies, and managing anger.

In societies with ethnic tensions, preliminary interventions are necessary before introducing these programs. In communities with low participation, initial collaborative activities, like group gatherings should precede training sessions to enhance engagement and effectiveness.

For future studies, it is recommended to consider a wider level of education, more provinces, cities, and regions along with the male community. Also, educational packages should be developed for people who have not had the opportunity to be literate.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

In order to comply with ethical issues, participants were informed about the research objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation, and they were assured that the information received would remain completely confidential. This study was approved by the Research Committee of [Islamic Azad Azad University, North of Tehran Branch](#), Tehran, Iran (Code: IR.IAU.TNB.REC.1400.054).

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the results and drafting of the manuscript. Each author approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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