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# Indicators of Legal Empowerment in Community-Based Paralegal Programs

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and identify context-specific indicators of legal empowerment as experienced by individuals participating in community-based paralegal programs in Tehran. The research employed a qualitative design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate the lived experiences of 24 participants engaged in community-based paralegal initiatives in Tehran. Participants were selected purposively to ensure relevance, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The analysis followed grounded theory procedures involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to generate themes that reflect participant-defined indicators of empowerment. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: Access to Legal Knowledge, Agency and Participation, and Structural Support and Trust. These themes encompassed various subthemes such as legal literacy, procedural confidence, community involvement, trust in paralegals, and institutional responsiveness. Participants reported increased legal understanding, greater confidence in engaging with legal procedures, and stronger community solidarity. Trust in paralegals and improved treatment by institutions were also cited as key empowerment markers. Additionally, storytelling and digital communication tools emerged as influential mechanisms in disseminating legal knowledge and building collective action. Legal empowerment within community-based paralegal programs is a multifaceted and contextually grounded process. It involves not only acquiring legal knowledge but also enhancing individual agency, fostering communal engagement, and building trust in both informal and formal structures. Empowerment indicators must therefore be identified through lived experiences rather than imposed frameworks, and future interventions should be designed with local voices, sustainability, and relational dynamics at the core.

**Keywords:** *Legal empowerment; community-based paralegals; access to justice; qualitative research; procedural agency; trust; Iran.*

## Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of legal empowerment has gained prominence in discussions around access to justice and human development, particularly within marginalized and underserved communities. Legal empowerment broadly refers to the process through which individuals and groups enhance their capacity to understand, use, and shape the law to advance their rights and interests (Golub, 2010). It aims to democratize the law by making it more accessible, intelligible, and responsive to the needs of the poor and disenfranchised. This approach departs from traditional top-down models of legal assistance and instead promotes bottom-up, participatory strategies that empower communities to engage with legal systems on their own terms (Sage &



Woolcock, 2006). Within this framework, community-based paralegal programs have emerged as vital mechanisms for promoting legal empowerment by embedding legal support in local contexts through trained non-lawyers who operate at the grassroots level.

Community-based paralegals serve as legal intermediaries who support individuals in navigating legal and administrative systems, raising awareness of legal rights, facilitating access to state services, and in some cases, mediating conflicts and advocating for systemic reforms (Gauri & Maru, 2008). Unlike formal legal professionals, paralegals are often embedded in the communities they serve and are therefore better positioned to understand local socio-cultural dynamics, power hierarchies, and informal dispute resolution mechanisms. Their work is typically grounded in legal literacy, mobilization, and problem-solving rather than courtroom litigation. In many low- and middle-income countries, paralegal programs have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing legal exclusion, especially among women, ethnic minorities, displaced persons, and other vulnerable groups (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2012). These programs offer an alternative model of justice delivery that complements formal legal institutions while challenging their inaccessibility and bureaucratic rigidity.

Despite the growing implementation of paralegal initiatives, the indicators used to evaluate legal empowerment remain relatively under-theorized and inconsistently applied. Legal empowerment is a multidimensional and context-dependent concept, making it difficult to assess using standardized legal metrics. Existing literature often focuses on outcomes such as increased legal awareness, improved dispute resolution, and enhanced state accountability (Maru, 2006). However, these indicators are typically evaluated from the standpoint of legal professionals or development agencies, rather than through the lived experiences and perceptions of the communities involved. As a result, many paralegal programs risk being evaluated on the basis of externally imposed benchmarks rather than locally meaningful indicators of empowerment. This gap necessitates a deeper, more grounded inquiry into how legal empowerment is experienced, articulated, and measured by those who directly participate in and benefit from community-based legal interventions.

Furthermore, empirical studies on legal empowerment often adopt quantitative or technocratic evaluation frameworks that fail to capture the nuanced and relational aspects of empowerment. For instance, legal empowerment is not only about acquiring knowledge of rights but also about developing the confidence to assert those rights, navigating complex bureaucratic systems, and challenging power imbalances in everyday life (Domingo & O'Neil, 2014). These dimensions are better captured through qualitative, participatory, and context-sensitive methodologies that allow for a richer understanding of how legal empowerment unfolds in practice. The current study seeks to address this gap by exploring the subjective indicators of legal empowerment as perceived by participants in community-based paralegal programs in Tehran. By focusing on local narratives and grounded experiences, the research aims to identify meaningful markers of empowerment that are both socially relevant and methodologically robust.

Iran presents a compelling case for studying legal empowerment through paralegal programs due to its hybrid legal system, socio-political complexities, and persistent challenges in ensuring access to justice for marginalized populations. Although the Iranian legal system formally guarantees legal representation and protection under law, structural and cultural barriers often impede these guarantees in practice. Issues such as legal illiteracy, gender inequality, rural-urban disparities, and bureaucratic opacity continue to hinder individuals' ability to access fair and timely justice (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010). In response, a number of civil society organizations and legal aid centers have initiated grassroots paralegal training programs aimed at empowering citizens, particularly women and low-

income families, to assert their rights in administrative and legal settings. These initiatives often operate informally and face political constraints, yet they represent critical efforts in the broader movement toward democratizing legal access in Iran.

The literature underscores several domains where paralegal interventions can contribute to empowerment: legal capability, procedural agency, community engagement, and structural responsiveness. Legal capability refers to an individual's knowledge of legal rights and processes, and their ability to apply this knowledge in real-life situations (Banakar & Travers, 2005). Procedural agency involves the confidence and capacity to participate in legal and bureaucratic processes, including filing complaints, attending hearings, or writing petitions. Community engagement emphasizes the collective dimensions of empowerment, such as forming legal support groups, organizing community dialogues, or participating in advocacy campaigns. Structural responsiveness, meanwhile, captures the degree to which legal institutions adapt or respond to community demands facilitated by paralegal intermediaries (Gauri & Gloppen, 2012). These domains are interlinked and context-specific, further highlighting the need for research that unpacks them through qualitative inquiry.

Additionally, legal empowerment is inherently relational and cannot be understood without considering the role of trust, power, and legitimacy in shaping individuals' interactions with law. Scholars have emphasized that people often do not engage with the legal system solely based on legal knowledge but based on whether they perceive it to be fair, accessible, and aligned with their values (Golub, 2003). Paralegals often serve as trusted community figures who mediate these perceptions and create informal spaces of legal deliberation that are otherwise inaccessible. Trust in paralegals themselves becomes an important indicator of empowerment, as it reflects confidence in both the messenger and the message. Likewise, perceived legitimacy of the paralegal program—its recognition by traditional leaders, local institutions, and community members—also determines its capacity to empower. These relational aspects have been underexplored in dominant legal development paradigms, which tend to emphasize institutional outputs over social dynamics.

Another critical consideration in the evaluation of legal empowerment is the extent to which it fosters sustainable behavioral and attitudinal changes. Short-term awareness-raising may increase knowledge, but empowerment involves longer-term transformations in how individuals perceive their rights, responsibilities, and ability to shape outcomes. Research has shown that legal empowerment processes are most effective when they engage participants as active agents in defining their problems and co-producing solutions (Piron & O'Neil, 2005). In this respect, legal empowerment is closely tied to broader concepts of human agency and social accountability, both of which require iterative engagement and community-based learning. Consequently, indicators of legal empowerment must go beyond surface-level metrics and delve into the internal and collective shifts that signal deeper social change.

The present study investigates these dimensions through an in-depth qualitative exploration of 24 participants engaged in community-based paralegal programs in Tehran. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis via NVivo software, the study identifies key indicators of legal empowerment grounded in participants' own narratives and lived experiences. The research does not aim to generate universal benchmarks but rather to uncover contextually rich insights into what empowerment means for individuals navigating complex legal environments with the support of paralegals. This approach aligns with calls in the literature for more participatory, user-centered models of legal empowerment research that prioritize voice, experience, and agency (Asian Development Bank, 2019).

By focusing on participant-defined indicators of empowerment, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how legal interventions operate in practice and how their impact can be meaningfully assessed. It also offers practical implications for the design, evaluation, and sustainability of paralegal programs, both in Iran and in similar socio-political settings. Ultimately, this research seeks to expand the conceptual and empirical boundaries of legal empowerment by situating it within the everyday struggles, strategies, and aspirations of those it aims to serve.

## Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design, aiming to explore and identify the key indicators of legal empowerment within community-based paralegal programs. Given the exploratory nature of the research topic and the focus on subjective perceptions, lived experiences, and contextual dynamics, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. The sample consisted of 24 individuals, including trained community-based paralegals, legal aid beneficiaries, and community stakeholders residing in Tehran. Inclusion criteria involved participants having direct experience with or engagement in paralegal activities within their community. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, whereby no new conceptual themes emerged from additional interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing for flexibility in probing individual perspectives while maintaining a consistent thematic structure. The interview protocol was developed based on a preliminary review of literature and expert consultations, focusing on themes such as access to justice, legal literacy, community engagement, and advocacy practices. Interviews were conducted in person at locations preferred by the participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical considerations, including anonymity, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality, were strictly observed throughout the process.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, guided by principles of grounded theory. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software to ensure systematic coding and data organization. The analysis process involved three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initially, open coding was applied to identify key concepts and recurring patterns in the interview transcripts. These codes were then grouped into broader categories during the axial coding phase, wherein relationships among the codes were explored and organized into subthemes. Finally, selective coding was employed to integrate and refine the emerging themes, focusing on core indicators of legal empowerment. Reflexivity and peer debriefing were used throughout the analysis to enhance trustworthiness and reduce potential researcher bias.

## Findings and Results

### Access to Legal Knowledge

#### Legal Literacy:

Participants frequently emphasized the importance of having a foundational understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities. Many respondents spoke about their initial unfamiliarity with legal procedures and how community-based paralegals helped bridge this gap. Key indicators included the ability to interpret basic laws, understand legal duties, and navigate justice-related processes. One participant shared, "Before attending the

sessions, I didn't even know I had the right to demand a copy of the court decision. Now, I ask and I read it myself." This development reflects an increase in procedural awareness and self-reliance in legal contexts.

#### Rights Awareness:

Awareness of rights in specific domains such as civil status, housing, and family law emerged as a crucial subtheme. Participants mentioned that paralegals often helped clarify the legal protections available to them, especially in cases of domestic abuse, eviction threats, or labor disputes. A participant noted, "The paralegal explained to me that I had a right to stay in the house until the court gave a final verdict. That changed everything." This knowledge translated into more informed decision-making and less fear in interactions with legal authorities.

#### Legal Language Familiarity:

Several interviewees identified their inability to understand formal legal language as a barrier that previously disempowered them. Concepts such as learning to decode legal terms and read legal notices independently were commonly mentioned. A woman in her mid-thirties said, "They used to give me letters, and I'd just keep them aside. Now I know what to look for and what it means." Empowerment was reflected in their growing confidence in interpreting official communication.

#### Accessibility of Legal Materials:

Community members highlighted the significance of simplified legal resources—such as visual guides, translated documents, and freely distributed pamphlets—that made information accessible. Respondents appreciated that these materials were adapted to local dialects and literacy levels. "They gave me a small booklet in Persian and Azeri. I showed it to my neighbor too," said one participant. Such efforts reduced reliance on legal professionals for basic understanding.

#### Training and Workshops:

The most cited form of empowerment came through participatory training delivered by paralegals. These sessions were seen as trustworthy and culturally grounded, with repeat attendance reflecting their impact. A participant stated, "When I first went, I was just curious. But the way they talked—using examples from our neighborhood—made it easy to understand." Trust in the facilitators played a central role in sustained engagement.

#### Community Legal Dialogue:

Informal conversations within the community, often facilitated by paralegals, fostered a collective understanding of legal issues. Participants described how peer discussions helped normalize talking about rights and conflicts. One interviewee shared, "We talk about these things now at the bakery or when waiting at the clinic. Before, it was all silence and fear." Legal dialogue emerged as a form of informal education.

#### Digital Legal Resources:

While access varied, participants who used digital tools noted the utility of mobile applications, WhatsApp groups, and online legal advice. Such platforms allowed for real-time sharing and support. A youth participant explained, "The group chat has a paralegal who responds when someone asks, even at night. That makes us feel we are not alone." This reflects a growing role of digital connectivity in grassroots legal empowerment.

#### Agency and Participation

##### Confidence in Legal Decision-Making:

A strong theme involved individuals expressing an increased ability to make independent legal decisions, such as filing complaints or confronting authorities. Participants frequently attributed this to the support and guidance

received from paralegals. One man remarked, “I went to the labor office alone for the first time. Before this, I would just quit the job and stay quiet.” Confidence in legal self-advocacy indicated deeper personal empowerment.

#### Representation and Self-Advocacy:

The transition from passive legal subjects to active participants was another critical indicator. Respondents described scenarios where they spoke on their own behalf or contributed to legal advocacy. A participant shared, “At the municipality meeting, I raised my hand and talked about our water problem. I never thought I’d speak in front of them.” These instances reflect a new sense of ownership over legal processes.

#### Community Involvement in Legal Processes:

Legal empowerment was also visible in collective activities, such as participating in neighborhood forums and group consultations. Participants often organized local meetings to discuss shared issues. “We make lists of problems and present them as a group. It’s more powerful,” explained one respondent. This subtheme pointed to growing civic engagement facilitated by paralegal programs.

#### Collective Action for Justice:

Beyond involvement, some communities moved toward collective legal action—protests, petitions, or formal complaints. A paralegal explained, “We encouraged them to file a joint complaint. When thirty people sign it, the officials listen differently.” These coordinated efforts showed how legal knowledge could translate into tangible collective strategies.

#### Empowerment through Legal Narratives:

Finally, sharing personal legal experiences served not only as catharsis but also as education for others. Participants frequently spoke of telling their stories during training or in informal circles. One participant reflected, “When I told others how I got compensation after the accident, they asked questions and learned from it.” Storytelling thus acted as a tool for reinforcing community-based legal knowledge.

#### Structural Support and Trust

##### Relationship with Paralegals:

Trust in paralegals was repeatedly described as a foundational factor in participants’ willingness to engage. Interviewees valued not only their legal guidance but also their emotional and social presence. “She sat with me when I cried and told me, ‘You have a right to speak.’ That made me believe in myself,” said a female participant. This emotional rapport was often cited as more empowering than technical knowledge alone.

##### Perceived Legitimacy of Paralegal Work:

The community’s recognition of paralegals as legitimate and trustworthy intermediaries enhanced the program’s effectiveness. Many respondents noted that elders or religious leaders began recommending paralegals, which encouraged broader acceptance. “When our mosque leader said the paralegal helped someone with land problems, people started to take them seriously,” explained one community member.

##### Support from Local Institutions:

Paralegal effectiveness was amplified when supported by formal or semi-formal institutions. Collaborations with NGOs, municipal offices, or clinics increased their credibility and reach. A participant said, “The local council gave us a room to hold sessions. That showed they supported what we were doing.” Institutional alignment also helped with referrals and escalations.

##### Continuity of Legal Assistance:



Participants expressed appreciation for the sustained engagement of paralegals who followed up on cases and remained available. Many compared this favorably to formal systems where follow-up was rare. “After I gave my papers, she came back next week to check what happened. That meant a lot,” noted one individual. Long-term presence emerged as a trust-building factor.

#### Institutional Responsiveness:

Lastly, indicators of legal empowerment included improved responsiveness from government institutions as a result of paralegal mediation. Participants described faster replies, clearer referrals, and more respectful treatment. One participant commented, “Before, the police ignored me. Now when I say the paralegal sent me, they listen.” This change in dynamics revealed a shift in power relations facilitated by community-based legal actors.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify contextually grounded indicators of legal empowerment through qualitative exploration of participants' experiences in community-based paralegal programs in Tehran. The findings revealed three overarching dimensions—Access to Legal Knowledge, Agency and Participation, and Structural Support and Trust—each encompassing several subthemes and specific empowerment indicators. Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate that legal empowerment extends beyond the acquisition of rights-based knowledge to include relational, emotional, and collective processes that influence individuals' capacity to interact with legal systems meaningfully.

Participants consistently emphasized that access to relevant and comprehensible legal knowledge was foundational to their empowerment. Legal literacy, rights awareness, and familiarity with legal terminology emerged as early indicators, enabling individuals to interpret legal documents, understand procedures, and recognize violations of their rights. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the centrality of legal knowledge in promoting individual autonomy and legal capability (Banakar & Travers, 2005; Maru, 2006). However, the study adds nuance by highlighting the importance of locally adapted educational materials, peer dialogue, and participatory workshops, which resonate with calls for culturally relevant legal literacy approaches (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2012). Notably, the role of digital tools—such as WhatsApp groups and mobile-based legal guidance—represents a relatively under-explored avenue in the legal empowerment literature, particularly in conservative or authoritarian contexts like Iran, where formal legal spaces are restricted (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010).

Beyond knowledge, empowerment was evident in the development of procedural agency and confidence in engaging with formal and informal justice mechanisms. Participants reported a newfound willingness to initiate complaints, represent themselves, and speak in public forums about their grievances. These behaviors signify a shift from legal passivity to active participation, mirroring findings in studies on legal mobilization and self-advocacy (Gauri & Maru, 2008; Domingo & O'Neil, 2014). However, the data revealed that this transition was often catalyzed not by technical instruction alone, but by emotional and relational support provided by paralegals. This reinforces Golub's (2010) contention that legal empowerment is as much about nurturing psychological readiness as it is about technical knowledge. For many, the experience of being listened to by a paralegal or being included in community dialogues about rights marked the beginning of their empowerment journey.

Another core dimension involved collective empowerment, including participation in neighborhood-level advocacy, petitioning, and group-based problem-solving. This communal aspect challenges individualistic models of empowerment and aligns with broader understandings of legal empowerment as a community-driven process

(Piron & O'Neil, 2005). When paralegal programs function as catalysts for collective action, they enable communities to negotiate power imbalances more effectively than isolated individuals can. This echoes observations in African and South Asian contexts where paralegal initiatives have contributed to community legal mapping and collective dispute resolution (Asian Development Bank, 2019; Gauri & Gloppen, 2012). In Tehran, where civic organizing is often constrained, such collective actions—although modest—demonstrated the capacity of legal knowledge to foster both solidarity and accountability.

Trust emerged as a crucial relational indicator of empowerment. Participants consistently emphasized their trust in paralegals, which influenced their willingness to engage with legal matters. The legitimacy of paralegals within the community—often reinforced by endorsements from religious leaders, NGOs, or municipal figures—further enhanced their effectiveness. This supports prior research suggesting that community trust is central to the success of paralegal models (Golub, 2003; Gauri & Maru, 2008). In contexts where formal legal actors are perceived as corrupt or inaccessible, paralegals serve not only as legal guides but also as emotional and cultural bridges. This relational dimension has been underemphasized in dominant legal empowerment metrics, which tend to focus on tangible outputs like case resolutions or awareness scores.

The study also shed light on the importance of sustainability and institutional responsiveness as indicators of structural empowerment. Participants valued the long-term availability of paralegals, follow-up on unresolved issues, and facilitation of formal-informal linkages. These aspects align with Gauri and Gloppen's (2012) framework of institutional responsiveness, which emphasizes the ability of legal institutions (including community actors) to adapt and respond to citizen needs. Notably, several participants reported improved treatment by formal authorities after being referred by a paralegal—an indirect but powerful indicator of enhanced legal standing. This finding suggests that paralegals, though not part of the formal justice system, can shift the attitudes of state actors through their perceived legitimacy and mediation.

An unexpected insight from this study was the role of narrative and storytelling in reinforcing empowerment. Participants frequently mentioned learning from others' legal journeys and sharing their own stories in community settings. This finding echoes the work of legal anthropologists who view storytelling as a means of reclaiming legal identity and building community-based knowledge systems (Banakar & Travers, 2005). In restrictive environments like Iran, where formal expression may be limited, narrative serves as both an educational and emancipatory tool.

Overall, the findings support and extend existing frameworks of legal empowerment by underscoring the relational, participatory, and localized nature of empowerment indicators. While prior research has acknowledged the multidimensionality of legal empowerment (Sage & Woolcock, 2006; Domingo & O'Neil, 2014), this study provides empirical grounding for a model that integrates personal agency, community engagement, and structural support. Importantly, the research cautions against overreliance on standardized evaluation tools and argues for indicators rooted in lived experiences and cultural context.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.



## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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