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Barriers to Accessing Legal Aid in Rural Areas: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the multidimensional barriers that impede access to legal aid among rural populations through the perspectives of individuals with direct or indirect experience in rural legal contexts. Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 participants residing in Tehran, each of whom had strong personal or professional ties to rural communities across Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The data collection instrument consisted of open-ended questions covering structural, socioeconomic, cultural, and policy-related barriers to legal aid. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Coding followed an inductive-deductive process, including open, axial, and selective coding to identify key themes and subthemes. Analysis revealed four major thematic categories: (1) structural and institutional barriers, including lack of legal infrastructure, bureaucratic complexity, and fragmented referral systems; (2) socioeconomic constraints, such as financial insecurity, low educational attainment, and technological exclusion; (3) cultural and social norms, including stigma, patriarchal structures, and reliance on informal justice; and (4) policy and governance failures, including poor rural legal planning, weak funding, and political neglect. Participants reported significant distrust in formal institutions and a strong preference for traditional or informal dispute mechanisms. Women and economically vulnerable individuals experienced disproportionately higher barriers. The findings underscore that access to legal aid in rural settings is hindered not only by physical distance and resource scarcity but also by deep-rooted cultural, economic, and policy-related factors. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted, inclusive, and locally responsive approach to legal service design and delivery.

Keywords: *Legal aid; rural justice; access to justice; qualitative research; legal empowerment; Iran; barriers to legal services.*

Introduction

Access to justice is a cornerstone of democratic governance and human rights protection, yet it remains unevenly distributed across different geographic and socio-economic groups. Legal aid, as a mechanism for enhancing access to justice, plays a critical role in ensuring that marginalized populations are not excluded from legal remedies due to financial or informational disadvantages (UNDP, 2016). However, rural populations face unique and persistent barriers in obtaining legal assistance, which amplifies their vulnerability to rights violations and systemic exclusion (Kirkland, 2021). These disparities are particularly significant in countries with pronounced urban-rural



divides, where legal infrastructure, professional services, and public resources are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas (Sandefur & Smyth, 2011).

Legal aid is defined by the United Nations as legal advice, assistance, and representation provided to people who would not otherwise afford it, aiming to facilitate access to justice in both criminal and civil matters (UNODC, 2016). While many countries have adopted formal legal aid frameworks, their operationalization in rural contexts remains insufficient. The World Justice Project (2023) highlights that individuals in remote areas are less likely to resolve their legal problems effectively, not only due to affordability but also due to geographic inaccessibility, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural barriers. As such, the problem of access to legal aid in rural settings cannot be adequately understood or addressed through administrative reforms alone; it requires a grounded understanding of the lived experiences of rural populations facing legal issues.

Research has consistently documented structural challenges to legal aid provision in rural contexts. These include a shortage of legal aid offices, limited human resources, inadequate transportation, and the absence of tailored legal awareness programs (Gramatikov & Porter, 2011). A study by Patel and Karkara (2017) found that more than 60% of rural women in South Asia had never heard of legal aid services, let alone accessed them. Similarly, in sub-Saharan Africa, a lack of decentralization of legal aid services has led to acute justice deficits in rural regions (Golub, 2003). In Iran, while legal aid has been formalized through the Bar Association and various state initiatives, most services are concentrated in major urban centers such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad (Sadeghi & Lotfi, 2020). This centralization leaves rural populations either unaware of their rights or physically unable to exercise them.

Socioeconomic constraints further exacerbate access issues. Individuals in rural areas often face financial insecurity, unstable employment, and limited education, all of which hinder their ability to engage with formal legal mechanisms (Coumarelos et al., 2012). Legal needs surveys conducted in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada have repeatedly shown that lower-income individuals are significantly less likely to take action on legal issues, and when they do, they are more likely to pursue informal rather than formal solutions (Pleasence et al., 2013). The digital divide has also emerged as a critical obstacle in recent years. As legal aid services increasingly migrate online, rural residents lacking digital literacy or infrastructure are further marginalized (Rasiah & Varughese, 2020).

Cultural and social norms also play a substantial role in shaping legal aid access in rural environments. In many communities, legal disputes are perceived as family or tribal matters best resolved through informal mechanisms such as village elders or religious councils (Harper, 2011). While these systems can offer rapid and culturally appropriate resolutions, they often fall short in upholding human rights and gender equity, especially in cases of domestic violence, land disputes, or inheritance conflicts (Skaar et al., 2016). Gender norms can be particularly restrictive, with women in rural areas frequently lacking the autonomy, mobility, or social support to seek legal redress independently (UN Women, 2019). Studies have found that women face additional stigmatization for pursuing legal action, which is often seen as defying traditional expectations of silence and familial obedience (Jivan & Forster, 2007).

Another critical barrier is the widespread mistrust in formal legal systems. Historical neglect, perceived corruption, and experiences of discrimination have contributed to a sense of alienation from formal justice institutions among rural populations (Banerjee et al., 2007). When legal services are seen as biased, inaccessible, or irrelevant, individuals are less likely to pursue justice, reinforcing cycles of silence and disenfranchisement (Sandefur, 2008).

Moreover, the lack of culturally sensitive legal aid frameworks results in procedural alienation, where rural residents do not understand the language, pace, or protocols of the formal justice system (Gauri & Brinks, 2008). This mismatch between the structure of legal systems and the needs of rural communities calls for more inclusive and participatory legal aid models.

Policy and governance failures also contribute to the persistence of these barriers. National legal aid strategies often fail to include specific provisions for rural justice or lack implementation mechanisms that translate policy into practice at the local level (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2015). Funding for rural legal aid remains limited, and there are few incentives for legal professionals to work in remote areas. In addition, monitoring and evaluation of legal aid effectiveness rarely disaggregate data by region, making rural justice gaps invisible in national reporting systems (OECD, 2019). Without targeted policy efforts, rural legal inequality remains both under-addressed and under-documented.

The growing body of literature underscores the importance of context-specific qualitative research to understand the unique barriers faced by rural populations. While quantitative studies have highlighted disparities in legal service coverage and use, they often lack the depth to uncover the lived realities, perceptions, and informal coping strategies that shape legal behavior in these communities (Roche et al., 2022). Qualitative methods, particularly those grounded in narrative and thematic analysis, allow for richer insights into the sociocultural and institutional dimensions of legal exclusion (Halliday et al., 2007). This study contributes to this critical area by exploring the subjective experiences of individuals connected to rural communities in Iran, focusing on the multidimensional barriers they encounter in accessing legal aid.

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted with 26 participants based in Tehran who had personal or professional ties to rural regions across Iran. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this research aims to answer the following question: What are the key barriers that inhibit rural residents from accessing legal aid services? The objective is not only to document the obstacles but also to illuminate the interplay between institutional design, socioeconomic vulnerability, and cultural norms that shape legal behavior in rural settings. By bringing forward the voices of those affected, this study seeks to inform the development of more equitable, accessible, and culturally responsive legal aid policies that bridge the urban-rural divide.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the perceived barriers to accessing legal aid in rural contexts. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals who either sought or were unable to seek legal assistance in rural settings. The study relied on purposive sampling to recruit participants who had firsthand knowledge or experience with legal aid systems, either as direct beneficiaries or through community involvement in legal or social services. A total of 26 participants were interviewed, consisting of legal aid recipients, rural residents with unmet legal needs, and community-based advocates. All participants were based in Tehran but had strong personal or professional connections with rural communities across different provinces. This ensured a diverse yet thematically coherent dataset. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new themes or insights were emerging from subsequent interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face or via secure digital platforms, depending on the participants' availability and accessibility. An interview guide was developed, containing

open-ended questions focused on participants' experiences with legal aid access, perceived institutional and structural obstacles, and coping strategies used when legal support was unavailable. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, using both inductive and deductive coding procedures. The transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo software (version 12) to facilitate systematic data organization, coding, and retrieval. Initial coding was conducted line-by-line to capture key concepts, followed by the grouping of similar codes into broader categories and themes. Axial coding was applied to examine the relationships between subthemes, and selective coding was used to develop overarching core themes that addressed the research question. The coding process was iterative, involving constant comparison across transcripts to ensure consistency and depth. Analytical memos and codebooks were maintained throughout the process to enhance rigor and traceability of findings. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, peer debriefing and member checking were employed at selected stages.

Findings and Results

Lack of Legal Infrastructure:

Many participants highlighted the absence of legal aid centers in their rural areas as a major obstacle. They noted that accessing legal services often required long travel to urban centers, which incurred significant time and financial costs. One participant stated, "There's no office or even a basic consultation desk in our town. If someone needs help, they have to go all the way to the provincial capital." This infrastructure gap disproportionately affects those with limited mobility or responsibilities at home.

Bureaucratic Complexity:

Participants frequently expressed frustration with complex and non-transparent bureaucratic procedures. Lengthy documentation requirements, unclear filing processes, and a lack of support staff to guide applicants were common complaints. One interviewee remarked, "You get a form, but no one tells you what to do next. You end up going back and forth for weeks." The system's opacity left many feeling overwhelmed and deterred from continuing their legal pursuit.

Inconsistent Service Delivery:

Respondents noted that even when legal aid was theoretically available, it was inconsistently delivered. Offices often operated on irregular schedules, and personnel changed frequently, making follow-up difficult. As one rural resident shared, "One day the office is open, the next it's closed. Sometimes a lawyer comes, sometimes they don't." This lack of reliability undermined trust and discouraged repeat engagement with legal aid systems.

Limited Outreach and Awareness Campaigns:

A substantial number of participants had not been aware that free legal aid services even existed. The limited presence of legal awareness campaigns in rural areas contributed to this knowledge gap. As one community member expressed, "I only found out about legal aid when someone from the city told me. There's no posters, no programs, nothing." This lack of public education severely restricts access.

Fragmented Referral Systems:

Participants who attempted to access legal help described referral processes as disjointed and poorly coordinated. Referrals from police stations, hospitals, or community centers often lacked clarity or follow-up

mechanisms. One respondent said, “They told me to go to another office, but when I got there, they didn’t know what I was talking about.” Such breakdowns in inter-agency communication contributed to delays and confusion.

Language and Document Accessibility:

Legal materials were often provided only in Persian, creating challenges for ethnic minorities who spoke other languages. Forms were also described as overly technical and difficult to interpret. A participant noted, “Even if you can read, the language is so legalistic, you still don’t understand it.” This barrier particularly affected elderly and less-educated residents.

Financial Insecurity:

Most participants emphasized the prohibitive costs associated with seeking legal help—even when the services were nominally free. Transportation, lost work hours, and associated fees created an insurmountable burden for many. As one farmer put it, “I can’t spend a whole day and money on buses just to file a complaint that may go nowhere.”

Low Educational Attainment:

Limited education made it difficult for some participants to comprehend legal procedures or assert their rights. One interviewee stated, “We don’t know how the system works, so we just stay quiet.” Illiteracy or minimal schooling compounded the intimidation felt toward formal legal institutions.

Employment Instability:

Many rural residents worked in informal or seasonal jobs and feared losing daily wages by taking time off to pursue legal matters. A participant commented, “If I leave my job for a day, someone else will take it. I can’t afford to risk that for court.” This economic vulnerability led to deprioritizing legal issues.

Gender-Based Economic Disparities:

Women were especially affected due to dependence on male family members for financial support and decision-making. Several female participants noted restricted mobility or needing permission to travel for legal purposes. One woman shared, “Even if I want to go, I can’t afford it, and my husband won’t allow it.”

Technological Exclusion:

With legal services increasingly digitized, participants without access to computers or internet connections found themselves further marginalized. A young respondent from a remote area said, “Everything is online now, but we don’t even have good network coverage, let alone the skills to use it.”

Stigma Around Legal Aid:

Participants discussed the social stigma attached to seeking legal help. In close-knit rural communities, turning to formal mechanisms was perceived as shameful or a sign of personal failure. One individual admitted, “People start talking if you go to court. They think you must have done something wrong.”

Patriarchal Family Structures:

Several participants, especially women, indicated that male dominance in family structures restricted their ability to engage independently with legal systems. One woman explained, “My father said it’s not a daughter’s place to go to court. We have to stay out of these things.” Such dynamics prevented timely and autonomous legal action.

Community Distrust of Legal Systems:

Distrust toward formal legal institutions was pervasive. Participants believed the system favored the wealthy and urban residents, leading them to avoid it altogether. One participant stated, “The courts are for city people. In villages, they don’t listen to us.” This alienation weakened legal empowerment.

Reliance on Informal Justice Mechanisms:

Instead of formal aid, many turned to local elders or tribal leaders to resolve disputes. These informal systems were seen as more accessible and culturally aligned, even if they lacked legal legitimacy. “Why go to court when our elders can settle it in a day?” said one participant.

Fear of Social Consequences:

Pursuing legal aid often came with the risk of community backlash. Participants feared gossip, retaliation, or damaged reputations. “People will say you’re trying to destroy the family’s name,” one participant recounted. These fears often silenced victims.

Intergenerational Attitudes Toward Law:

Attitudes toward law and legal recourse varied across generations. Older individuals tended to mistrust legal institutions or prefer traditional methods, while younger participants were skeptical yet more open to change. One young man observed, “My grandfather says courts are corrupt, but I think things might be different now.”

Religious and Moral Barriers:

Some participants believed legal disputes should be resolved privately or spiritually rather than through courts. Religious teachings emphasizing forgiveness and community harmony discouraged formal action. One participant said, “Our faith teaches us to settle things peacefully, not to take each other to court.”

Lack of Targeted Rural Legal Policy:

Participants expressed frustration that rural areas were often excluded from legal reforms or policies. As one community advocate stated, “Most policies are made for cities. There’s nothing that addresses rural problems directly.” This policy neglect led to inadequate services.

Poor Funding Allocation:

A recurring theme was the chronic underfunding of rural legal aid programs. Participants and advocates cited a lack of staff, outdated materials, and no incentives for legal professionals to work in remote areas. “They send one lawyer to cover ten villages,” said one participant.

Weak Monitoring and Evaluation:

Participants observed that legal aid programs lacked accountability or performance checks. Without effective oversight, service quality varied widely. One interviewee remarked, “No one checks if the aid centers are actually helping people. They just exist on paper.”

Political Neglect of Rural Justice Issues:

There was a widespread belief that rural legal needs were not a priority in national or regional politics. As one participant put it, “Our voices are too small to matter. They make laws, but they never ask us what we need.” This political invisibility worsened legal inequality.

Discontinuity in Legal Reform Efforts:

Finally, participants expressed concern over frequent changes in legal policies and aid programs, which disrupted access and eroded trust. One legal aid worker commented, “We start a program, then funding stops or policies change. People stop believing it will last.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the complex and multidimensional barriers faced by individuals in rural areas when attempting to access legal aid services. The findings revealed four overarching themes: structural and

institutional barriers, socioeconomic constraints, cultural and social norms, and policy and governance challenges. Each of these themes represents interconnected yet distinct dimensions of rural legal exclusion. Together, they contribute to an entrenched cycle in which the legal rights of rural populations remain largely theoretical rather than realized in practice. This discussion contextualizes the study's findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives.

Structural and institutional obstacles emerged as the most immediate and tangible barriers to accessing legal aid. Participants emphasized the lack of nearby legal infrastructure, complex and bureaucratic procedures, inconsistent service delivery, and fragmented referral systems. These findings are consistent with prior research that underscores the infrastructural deficit in rural justice systems, where courts, legal clinics, and trained professionals are primarily located in urban hubs (Sandefur & Smyth, 2011; Golub, 2003). In contexts such as Iran, where urban centralization of services is pronounced, the absence of decentralized legal services severely limits accessibility for those residing in remote areas (Sadeghi & Lotfi, 2020). The inconsistencies in operating hours and staffing also reflect what Kirkland (2021) describes as "legal deserts"—regions with minimal or no legal resources. These deserts not only disrupt continuity of service but also erode trust and reliability, making it more likely that rural residents will abandon legal processes before completion.

Moreover, participants pointed to bureaucratic complexity and the inaccessibility of legal documentation as significant deterrents. This aligns with findings from Gramatikov and Porter (2011), who argue that the over-reliance on formal legal language and procedures alienates non-urban populations, particularly those with lower education levels. The absence of translated legal materials or simplified forms further marginalizes ethnic and linguistic minorities in rural regions (UN Women, 2019). These issues were particularly salient for older or less literate individuals in this study, highlighting the pressing need for more linguistically inclusive and user-friendly legal communication.

Socioeconomic challenges constituted a second major theme, particularly financial insecurity, low educational attainment, and unstable employment. Participants emphasized that even when legal aid was technically free, indirect costs such as transportation, lost wages, and time commitments rendered the services effectively inaccessible. This finding reinforces conclusions from Coumarelos et al. (2012) and Pleasence et al. (2013), who found that indirect costs are one of the most underestimated yet consequential factors influencing legal disengagement among low-income populations. The fact that rural residents often work in informal or seasonal employment exacerbates this dynamic, as taking time off to pursue legal remedies can mean losing vital daily income. In this way, the legal system's rigid structure fails to accommodate the economic realities of the rural poor.

Women, in particular, faced amplified socioeconomic and mobility-related barriers, a pattern well-documented in the literature. Previous studies show that patriarchal norms, financial dependence, and social restrictions significantly limit women's access to justice in rural communities (Jivan & Forster, 2007; UN Women, 2019). This study corroborates those insights by revealing how women are often unable to travel independently, lack control over financial resources, and experience heightened social stigma when attempting to engage with legal institutions. These findings point to the intersectionality of gender and geography as critical factors in legal vulnerability.

Technological exclusion also featured prominently in the narratives of participants. Many reported being unable to benefit from digital legal services due to poor internet access or a lack of digital literacy. As legal aid increasingly shifts toward online platforms, this exclusion poses a growing threat to justice equity (Rasiah & Varughese, 2020). In line with findings by the World Justice Project (2023), digital legal tools—although intended to broaden access—

may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities when not implemented with sensitivity to infrastructural and educational disparities.

Cultural and social norms form the third dimension of barriers, manifesting in stigma around seeking legal aid, reliance on informal justice mechanisms, and deeply rooted distrust of formal legal institutions. In many cases, participants reported that seeking formal legal help was perceived as a betrayal of community norms or family honor. This phenomenon has been previously identified in Harper (2011), who noted that traditional dispute resolution systems are often favored in rural communities due to their perceived impartiality, speed, and alignment with local values. However, reliance on such systems may not provide adequate redress, especially in cases involving power imbalances, such as domestic abuse or land conflicts involving women.

The role of social stigma was especially pronounced in this study. Participants feared gossip, social ostracism, or retaliation if they were seen engaging with formal legal systems. This echoes the findings of Sandefur (2008), who argues that legal disengagement is not merely the result of logistical obstacles but also of perceived risks to social cohesion. In small rural communities, maintaining a respectable social image often takes precedence over the pursuit of justice, particularly in sensitive matters such as family disputes or gender-based violence.

Distrust in the fairness and impartiality of legal institutions further discouraged participants from seeking formal legal help. Many perceived the system as biased toward urban elites, corrupt, or indifferent to rural needs. This finding is congruent with studies in multiple global south contexts, where state legal institutions are often viewed with suspicion or seen as alien to local realities (Banerjee et al., 2007; Gauri & Brinks, 2008). Such distrust creates a cyclical dynamic: when people avoid using legal systems due to mistrust, their needs go unmet, reinforcing the perception that legal institutions are irrelevant or inaccessible.

The final theme—policy and governance failures—reflects the systemic neglect of rural justice needs in legal planning and reform. Participants reported a lack of rural-specific policies, poor funding allocation, and weak implementation of existing legal aid mandates. Similar critiques have been raised by the Open Society Justice Initiative (2015), which emphasizes the urban bias in legal aid design and the absence of rural-sensitive delivery models. This study contributes to that discourse by providing empirical evidence from a country like Iran, where rural justice needs remain largely invisible in national policy dialogues.

Furthermore, participants voiced frustration with the discontinuity of legal reform efforts. Frequent changes in legal aid programs, poor monitoring, and lack of political commitment to rural justice resulted in fragile systems that failed to sustain trust. As OECD (2019) notes, a lack of outcome-oriented evaluations in legal aid programs undermines their long-term effectiveness, particularly in underserved areas. Without consistent funding, stable staffing, and accountable leadership, rural legal aid will remain more aspirational than operational.

In sum, this study confirms and extends previous research by offering a granular, qualitative look into the real-world experiences of rural-affiliated individuals facing legal barriers. The findings highlight that access to justice is not simply a matter of legal availability but one of infrastructural design, social equity, cultural sensitivity, and political will. Bridging the urban-rural legal divide requires holistic reforms that address each of these dimensions through a bottom-up, participatory approach that centers the voices of marginalized populations.

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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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