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Dimensions of Legal Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in Public Services

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the dimensions of legal accessibility for persons with disabilities in public services, focusing on structural, informational, procedural, and attitudinal barriers in the context of Tehran, Iran. A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenological inquiry was employed to capture the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing legal and administrative services. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 participants selected through purposive sampling in Tehran. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the aid of NVivo software. The analysis proceeded through open, axial, and selective coding, ensuring an inductive approach to theme generation. Trustworthiness was established through peer debriefing, member checking, and triangulation of coding procedures. Thematic analysis yielded four core dimensions of legal accessibility: (1) structural barriers in legal access, including inaccessible physical infrastructure and digital platforms; (2) limited awareness and understanding of legal rights due to poor outreach and legal illiteracy; (3) negative experiences in interactions with legal and administrative bodies, characterized by discrimination, communication breakdowns, and procedural complexity; and (4) enabling factors and recommendations, including the supportive role of advocacy organizations, inclusive policies, and proposed legal reforms. Participants described widespread inaccessibility and institutional distrust, but also highlighted practical solutions and positive institutional practices. Legal accessibility for persons with disabilities in Tehran is constrained by multifaceted and intersecting barriers that limit equal participation in justice and public services. Addressing these challenges requires structural reforms, rights-based education, institutional training, and inclusive policymaking. The findings offer evidence-based insights to inform national disability strategies and promote compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Keywords: Legal accessibility; disability rights; public services; qualitative research; Iran; structural barriers; NVivo analysis; CRPD.

Introduction

The concept of accessibility, particularly in relation to legal rights and services, plays a pivotal role in ensuring the inclusion, autonomy, and equality of persons with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by over 180 countries, including Iran, asserts that persons with disabilities must have equal access to justice and public services on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). Legal accessibility not only includes the removal of physical and structural barriers but also encompasses access to legal information, procedural justice, and participation in administrative and legal processes. Despite this international



mandate, considerable empirical evidence suggests that persons with disabilities continue to face systemic exclusion and disadvantage when interacting with legal and public service institutions (Degener, 2017; Flynn, 2019). This study aims to investigate the dimensions of legal accessibility from the lived experiences of persons with disabilities within public service systems, with a specific focus on the Iranian context.

Legal accessibility is an essential component of broader social and civic inclusion. Persons with disabilities are frequently marginalized in the legal sphere due to infrastructural inadequacies, informational asymmetries, procedural complexity, and discriminatory institutional attitudes (Lord et al., 2012). For example, studies across multiple jurisdictions have highlighted the lack of physical access to courtrooms, absence of sign language interpretation in hearings, and limited digital accessibility of legal documents as persistent obstacles (Lawson & Beckman, 2020; Karr et al., 2018). In many developing countries, including Iran, these issues are exacerbated by resource limitations, inconsistent policy enforcement, and a general lack of disability awareness among public officials (Kiani, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative to understand not only what barriers exist but how persons with disabilities interpret and experience these limitations when navigating legal systems.

A central barrier to legal accessibility is infrastructural inaccessibility. Physical access to legal buildings remains limited for many individuals with mobility or sensory impairments. According to a World Bank report (2017), even where laws mandate accessible infrastructure, actual implementation remains poor due to lack of monitoring, insufficient funding, or low prioritization. These issues are not merely technical but contribute directly to the denial of justice. A person who cannot enter a courthouse, reach a legal aid office, or read signage independently is effectively excluded from justice systems. Studies have further shown that this exclusion fosters a sense of alienation, disempowerment, and distrust in legal institutions among persons with disabilities (Goodley, 2014).

Beyond physical infrastructure, legal accessibility also requires access to information and procedural understanding. Legal literacy among persons with disabilities is often significantly lower than in the general population, not due to cognitive limitations but because of systemic barriers to education, accessible information, and public outreach (Meyers, 2016). Research indicates that legal documents and processes are typically written in complex, jargon-heavy language that is difficult for laypersons to comprehend, especially for individuals with intellectual or learning disabilities (Parker & Clements, 2008). Furthermore, online platforms and government websites often fail to meet basic web accessibility standards, leaving individuals who rely on screen readers, alternative text, or simplified navigation unable to complete essential tasks (Lazar et al., 2015). These digital exclusions are particularly concerning in the age of e-governance, where increasing numbers of public services, including legal filings and benefits claims, are moving online.

Cultural and attitudinal barriers compound the structural and informational exclusions that persons with disabilities face in legal systems. Misconceptions about disability, such as beliefs in inherent incompetence, passivity, or dependence, can influence how public officials and legal professionals interact with individuals with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2013). These biases may manifest in patronizing communication, dismissal of complaints, or refusal to accommodate procedural needs. Studies in Iran and elsewhere have documented such attitudinal discrimination, which discourages persons with disabilities from asserting their rights or pursuing legal redress (Kiani, 2009; Ghasemi & Yekta, 2021). In legal contexts where discretion plays a role in service delivery, such as eligibility assessments or administrative hearings, these biases can have tangible impacts on outcomes.

It is also important to consider the procedural and bureaucratic dimensions of legal accessibility. Complex documentation requirements, fragmented service systems, and long processing times disproportionately burden

individuals who may require more time, support, or flexibility. Research in disability studies emphasizes that “bureaucratic inertia” can become a form of structural violence when it effectively denies individuals the ability to claim their legal entitlements (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012). For example, repeated visits to multiple offices, re-submission of documentation, and unclear complaint mechanisms are commonly reported obstacles among people with disabilities seeking justice in public service systems (Titchkosky, 2011). In countries with underdeveloped disability-specific administrative mechanisms, these barriers are especially severe.

Despite these challenges, the role of support systems—such as disability rights organizations, peer support groups, and legal aid clinics—has been increasingly recognized as vital in improving legal accessibility. These actors help bridge the gap between formal legal systems and the lived realities of persons with disabilities by providing tailored information, legal accompaniment, and rights education (Hughes et al., 2012). Advocacy organizations have also been instrumental in promoting inclusive legal reforms, monitoring policy implementation, and developing community-based justice models that reflect the principles of the CRPD (Kayess & French, 2008). Nonetheless, these efforts are often fragmented, underfunded, or absent in certain regions, highlighting the need for institutionalized mechanisms within the state apparatus to promote legal access and participation.

The Iranian context provides a compelling setting for examining these issues. Iran has ratified the CRPD and enacted a number of legal provisions aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, including the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2018). However, implementation remains inconsistent across public service domains. While some progress has been made in areas such as disability pensions or educational inclusion, access to justice and administrative procedures has received comparatively less policy attention (Ghasemi & Yekta, 2021). Legal services in Iran are typically centralized, documentation-heavy, and limited in their use of accessible formats or communication aids. Moreover, there is limited empirical research exploring how persons with disabilities experience these legal systems in practice, particularly from a qualitative perspective that centers their voices and agency.

Given this background, the present study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature by exploring the dimensions of legal accessibility as experienced by persons with disabilities in Tehran, Iran. The study adopts a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with 28 individuals with diverse disabilities. By analyzing their narratives using thematic analysis, the research aims to identify the structural, informational, attitudinal, and procedural factors that shape access to legal rights and services. In doing so, it offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, and advocacy organizations seeking to promote a more inclusive and equitable legal system. The findings are also intended to contribute to the broader international discourse on disability justice, legal empowerment, and public service reform.

In sum, legal accessibility for persons with disabilities is not only a matter of technical adjustments or physical infrastructure but involves deep structural and cultural transformations in how legal systems operate. It requires a commitment to universal design, inclusive education, institutional accountability, and participatory governance. This study builds on existing global knowledge while offering locally grounded data to inform future reforms in Iran and comparable settings. Understanding the lived experiences of persons with disabilities is a necessary first step toward ensuring that legal systems fulfill their foundational promise: equal justice for all.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of persons with disabilities regarding legal accessibility in public services. The aim was to uncover subjective interpretations of accessibility barriers, rights awareness, and interactions with public institutions. Participants were purposefully selected using a criterion-based sampling strategy, ensuring they had direct experience with legal or procedural barriers in accessing public services. The study included 28 participants residing in Tehran, encompassing a diverse range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, and mobility impairments. Theoretical saturation guided the sample size, and data collection was concluded when no new thematic insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences with public service systems, perceptions of legal rights and entitlements, and encounters with formal legal structures and procedures. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations accessible to participants or, in some cases, via telephone or video calls, depending on individual accessibility needs and preferences. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. All interviews were conducted in Persian and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts. Data coding and analysis were carried out using NVivo software to systematically organize, classify, and interpret the qualitative data. An inductive coding process began with open coding to capture emerging concepts, followed by axial coding to establish connections between categories, and finally selective coding to integrate themes into broader conceptual dimensions of legal accessibility. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was employed to identify similarities and differences across participant accounts. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and member checking with selected participants to validate interpretations.

Findings and Results

1. Structural Barriers in Legal Access

Inaccessible Legal Infrastructure:

Many participants emphasized the physical inaccessibility of legal and administrative buildings. Several interviewees reported that court buildings lacked ramps, elevators were either non-functional or absent, and there were no tactile or Braille-based signs to aid navigation. One participant stated, "I had to be carried up the stairs by my brother just to reach the courtroom. It felt humiliating."

Digital Inaccessibility:

Online legal services, though expanding, were largely unusable for persons with visual or cognitive disabilities. Forms lacked compatibility with screen readers, digital platforms used small, unscalable fonts, and CAPTCHA features blocked access entirely. One visually impaired participant shared, "When I tried to file my complaint online, the screen reader couldn't read the buttons. I had to give up."

Transportation Challenges:

Access to legal services was also limited by inadequate transportation. Buses lacked ramps or low-floor access, and signage was poorly designed. One respondent noted, "The courtroom might as well be on the moon. Getting there is a battle every time."

Bureaucratic Complexity:

Participants described legal procedures as excessively bureaucratic, requiring rigid documentation and multi-step processes that were not easily navigable. As one participant expressed, “They kept sending me from one office to another, asking for papers I didn’t know existed.”

Staff Unfamiliarity with Disability Needs:

A recurring complaint was the lack of disability awareness among legal staff. Participants reported insensitive language, dismissiveness, and poor communication strategies. “They talked to my assistant as if I wasn’t even in the room,” one participant explained, highlighting the frequent disregard for agency and autonomy.

2. Awareness and Understanding of Legal Rights

Limited Legal Literacy:

Many participants expressed a lack of knowledge regarding their legal rights and entitlements. This was often rooted in the absence of accessible civic education and legal literacy programs. One participant remarked, “No one ever taught us what we can demand. We just assume we don’t have rights.”

Ineffective Outreach Programs:

Participants noted that outreach campaigns failed to reach the disability community effectively. Materials were often text-heavy, lacked alternate formats, and were not distributed via disability-specific channels. A participant observed, “Even when there are rights, no one tells us. There are no workshops or leaflets in Braille.”

Cultural Misconceptions about Disability:

Stigma and societal misconceptions shaped internalized beliefs about entitlement. Many participants felt conditioned to accept substandard service or believed that legal protection was a “favor,” not a right. One stated, “We were raised to not make noise. So we don’t push back even when wronged.”

3. Interaction with Legal and Administrative Bodies

Discriminatory Treatment:

Participants reported numerous experiences of being ignored, spoken down to, or outright dismissed in legal settings. One participant shared, “The officer said, ‘Why are you even here? Let someone else handle it.’ I felt invisible.”

Communication Barriers:

The lack of accommodations such as sign language interpreters, plain-language documents, or simplified explanations created significant communication breakdowns. One deaf participant said, “I had to rely on my friend to interpret, and even he didn’t understand the legal terms fully.”

Delayed Case Handling:

Respondents described excessive waiting times and repeated case deferrals. Some cases remained unresolved for years. A participant remarked, “They just kept postponing. Maybe they think we don’t notice or can’t follow up.”

Accessibility of Complaint Mechanisms:

While complaint systems formally existed, they were largely inaccessible—often requiring online submissions, physical presence, or lengthy written documentation. “I tried to complain about being mistreated, but the process itself was another barrier,” one respondent said.

Lack of Support Personnel:

Participants highlighted the absence of accessibility coordinators or legal aides within public institutions. Most relied on family members or external NGOs. One interviewee explained, “There’s no one in the office who understands what we need. I always have to bring someone with me.”

Trust Deficits in Legal System:

A deep-seated distrust of the legal system was evident. Past negative experiences, lack of resolution, and perceived systemic bias left participants reluctant to engage. As one said, “You fight so hard just to be seen, and nothing changes. Eventually, you give up.”

4. Facilitators and Recommendations

Role of Disability Advocacy Organizations:

NGOs played a vital role in bridging the accessibility gap. Participants appreciated workshops, accompaniment to legal appointments, and informational guides provided by these organizations. “Without [the advocacy group], I wouldn’t even know where to start,” one participant explained.

Inclusive Policy Design:

Several interviewees recommended participatory policymaking involving persons with disabilities. Inclusive design audits and ongoing evaluations were proposed. A participant suggested, “Don’t make decisions about us without us. We know what works.”

Technology as Enabler:

While digital tools presented barriers, they also held potential. Participants suggested voice-assisted interfaces, AI-powered guidance, and accessible kiosks as effective innovations. One stated, “If apps were made with us in mind, we could navigate things independently.”

Positive Institutional Practices:

Some participants mentioned rare but impactful experiences with empathetic staff, accessible facilities, or trained legal personnel. “That office had a disability liaison—I didn’t have to explain everything from scratch,” shared one interviewee.

Proposed Legal Reforms:

Participants widely supported the introduction of enforceable legal standards on accessibility, penalties for non-compliance, and streamlined documentation processes. One remarked, “Make it law that accessibility isn’t optional. That’s the only way we’ll be taken seriously.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted dimensions of legal accessibility as experienced by persons with disabilities in Tehran. Through qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with 28 participants, four major categories were identified: structural barriers in legal access, awareness and understanding of legal rights, interactions with legal and administrative bodies, and facilitators and recommendations. The findings reveal a complex interplay of physical, informational, procedural, and attitudinal barriers that systematically hinder legal participation for persons with disabilities. Importantly, these findings are consistent with global research while also highlighting locally specific challenges and culturally embedded attitudes.

One of the most salient themes that emerged was the prevalence of structural barriers, especially related to inaccessible legal infrastructure and digital systems. Participants described encountering physical inaccessibility in court buildings, administrative offices, and transportation networks. These challenges resonate with the literature showing that physical inaccessibility remains one of the most significant obstacles to justice for persons with disabilities worldwide (World Bank, 2017; Lawson & Beckman, 2020). In addition, digital inaccessibility—such as online platforms incompatible with screen readers or CAPTCHA barriers—was frequently cited. This aligns with

Lazar, Goldstein, and Taylor (2015), who emphasize that without accessible digital infrastructure, e-government initiatives may inadvertently exacerbate exclusion. These structural impediments create a dual-layered marginalization, restricting both physical entry into justice spaces and digital navigation of legal services.

Another major theme revolved around legal literacy and rights awareness. Many participants expressed limited knowledge about their legal rights, processes, or avenues of redress. This finding parallels prior research highlighting how inadequate legal education and outreach disproportionately impact people with disabilities (Flynn, 2019; Meyers, 2016). The absence of accessible civic education programs and culturally relevant communication channels fosters a landscape where persons with disabilities are often unaware of their entitlements or discouraged from seeking legal remedies. Furthermore, the participants' comments suggest that outreach initiatives are either insufficient or poorly designed for disability audiences—often excluding formats such as Braille, audio content, or simplified language. These observations support Karr et al. (2018), who argue that formal inclusion on paper means little without meaningful access to legal literacy tools tailored to different disability types.

The study also revealed serious concerns in interactions with legal and administrative personnel, which were often characterized by discriminatory behavior, procedural delays, and communication breakdowns. Several participants reported feeling dismissed or infantilized in interactions with legal actors, reflecting the persistence of ableist attitudes documented in global disability literature (Shakespeare, 2013; Goodley, 2014). These negative encounters were further compounded by communication barriers, such as the absence of sign language interpreters or reliance on jargon-heavy documents. Parker and Clements (2008) argue that the exclusion of persons with intellectual, developmental, or sensory disabilities from meaningful legal communication violates both ethical and procedural standards of justice. Moreover, bureaucratic complexity—manifested in the form of redundant paperwork and unclear procedures—was noted as a form of structural violence that discourages legal pursuit. Soldatic and Meekosha (2012) frame such bureaucratic exclusion as a systemic mechanism through which the neoliberal state marginalizes vulnerable populations by withholding access to critical public services.

Importantly, the findings also point to trust deficits in the legal system among many participants. A pattern of negative prior experiences, combined with perceived indifference and delays, cultivated a sense of hopelessness and institutional distrust. Similar sentiments have been observed in other empirical studies, where participants described the legal system as “insensitive,” “exhausting,” or “rigged” against people with disabilities (Lawson & Beckman, 2020; Hughes et al., 2012). This erosion of trust reduces the likelihood of legal system engagement and undercuts long-term efforts to promote inclusion. It also suggests that accessibility reforms must go beyond technical adjustments and embrace cultural change within institutions to restore confidence and dignity.

Despite these barriers, the study found that disability advocacy organizations serve as critical facilitators of legal accessibility. These organizations help bridge the information and support gap through rights workshops, legal accompaniment, and advocacy materials. These findings echo those of Kayess and French (2008), who emphasize the centrality of civil society organizations in actualizing the principles of the CRPD at the local level. Participants described feeling more empowered when guided by advocates or peer-support networks, highlighting the need for formal partnerships between legal institutions and community-based disability organizations. Encouragingly, some participants also cited examples of positive institutional practices, such as the presence of trained accessibility liaisons or respectful service providers—demonstrating that inclusive models are not only possible but already partially implemented in certain areas.

Finally, the findings point to specific policy and legal reforms needed to promote accessibility. These include the mandatory inclusion of accessibility audits in legal facilities, standardization of complaint procedures in alternative formats, and the enforcement of penalties for non-compliance with accessibility laws. These suggestions align with global best practices recommended by Degener (2017) and the United Nations (2006), which advocate for legally binding accessibility mandates, disability-inclusive policymaking, and robust monitoring frameworks.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute significantly to both academic scholarship and applied policy debates. They reinforce the argument that legal accessibility is not a matter of charity or accommodation but a right enshrined in international human rights frameworks. The study also expands on prior literature by offering empirical insights into how these barriers manifest in a Middle Eastern context, where cultural, infrastructural, and bureaucratic conditions differ from those typically studied in Western disability research.

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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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