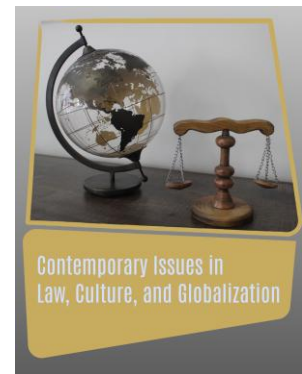




Legal Empowerment and Cultural Marginalization Among Vulnerable Groups

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how culturally marginalized and socially vulnerable groups in Tehran experience legal empowerment, institutional access, and everyday encounters with justice-related systems. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from Tehran, including members of vulnerable groups and frontline legal or social-service actors working with marginalized communities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation in gender, age, social position, migration background, disability status, and exposure to legal institutions. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the twenty-first interview, followed by three additional interviews to confirm thematic consistency. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of legal awareness, institutional trust, cultural recognition, documentation, discrimination, legal aid, and strategies for rights claiming. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. Credibility was enhanced through peer debriefing, iterative coding, memo-writing, and participant validation of selected interpretive summaries. Five main categories emerged from the analysis: legal invisibility and procedural distance; cultural stigma and institutional mistrust; rights translation through intermediaries; fragmented legal knowledge and unequal access to information; and conditional empowerment under economic and social constraint. Participants described formal law as simultaneously protective and inaccessible. Legal empowerment was rarely experienced as simple knowledge of rights; rather, it depended on whether participants could interpret legal language, overcome fear of authorities, obtain supportive mediation, and avoid social or economic retaliation. Community-based intermediaries, legal-aid workers, and trusted informal networks played a central role in transforming abstract legal rights into practical action. The findings suggest that legal empowerment among vulnerable groups requires more than formal legal awareness campaigns. It depends on culturally responsive institutions, accessible legal communication, trusted community-based support, and structural reforms that reduce the costs of rights claiming. Without attention to cultural marginalization, legal empowerment initiatives risk reproducing exclusion rather than expanding justice.

Keywords: legal empowerment; cultural marginalization; vulnerable groups; access to justice; legal consciousness; qualitative research; Tehran

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Introduction

Legal empowerment has become a central concept in contemporary debates on access to justice, social inclusion, and human development. At its broadest level, legal empowerment refers to the process through which individuals and communities come to know, use, and shape the law in order to protect their rights and improve their social conditions. Unlike conventional rule-of-law approaches that often emphasize institutional reform from above, legal empowerment shifts attention to the lived capacity of ordinary people to engage law as a practical resource. This shift is particularly significant for vulnerable groups, whose encounters with law are often mediated by poverty, cultural stigma, linguistic difference, insecure documentation, gendered expectations, disability, migration status, and institutional mistrust. For these groups, the law may exist formally as a promise of equality, but in everyday life it may appear distant, technical, expensive, intimidating, or culturally alien.

The global access-to-justice literature has repeatedly shown that unmet legal needs are not distributed equally across society. Vulnerable individuals are more likely to face housing insecurity, labor exploitation, family conflict, discrimination, documentation problems, debt, administrative exclusion, and barriers to public services. Yet they are also less likely to identify these problems as legal issues or to receive timely, affordable, and culturally meaningful assistance. Sandefur (2016) argues that many people do not experience justice problems as “legal” in the first instance; instead, they understand them as personal, bureaucratic, economic, or relational troubles. This insight is crucial because legal empowerment begins not only with access to lawyers or courts, but also with the ability to name an injury, recognize a rights-based dimension, and imagine a legitimate pathway for response. Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat’s (1980–1981) classic account of “naming, blaming, and claiming” remains foundational here: legal mobilization depends on the social transformation of an experience into a grievance and then into a claim.

For culturally marginalized groups, however, the movement from injury to claim is rarely linear. Cultural marginalization refers to the processes through which particular groups, identities, languages, practices, or social positions are devalued within dominant institutional settings. Marginalization may occur through overt discrimination, but it may also operate through ordinary administrative routines: unfamiliar forms, technical language, lack of interpretation, dismissive treatment, assumptions about credibility, gendered norms of respectability, or bureaucratic suspicion toward migrants and low-income citizens. In this sense, culture is not merely a background variable. It shapes how people understand law, how institutions perceive claimants, and how rights are translated into action. Merry (2006a, 2006b) has shown that rights become effective only when they are translated into local meanings, social relationships, and practical institutions. Without such translation, legal norms may remain abstract and socially weak, especially for groups whose everyday lives are organized through informal norms and unequal power relations.

The concept of legal consciousness provides a useful socio-legal framework for examining this problem. Legal consciousness refers to the ways people understand, invoke, avoid, resist, or reinterpret law in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). It emphasizes that law is not limited to statutes, courts, or official decisions; rather, it is embedded in ordinary expectations about authority, fairness, risk, and legitimacy. For vulnerable groups, legal consciousness may be marked by ambivalence. Individuals may believe that the law promises protection, while also assuming that legal institutions are not designed for “people like us.” They may know that they possess certain rights, but still avoid formal complaint because of cost, fear of retaliation, shame, language barriers, uncertain documentation, or distrust of officials. Thus, legal empowerment is not simply a cognitive achievement. It is relational, cultural, emotional, and institutional.

Earlier socio-legal scholarship has also emphasized the unequal structure of legal capacity. Galanter’s (1974) distinction between “repeat players” and “one-shotters” remains relevant for understanding why vulnerable individuals often face

structural disadvantage in legal processes. Repeat players—such as state agencies, employers, landlords, institutional actors, and well-resourced organizations—typically possess legal knowledge, procedural familiarity, financial resources, and strategic patience. Vulnerable claimants, by contrast, often enter legal processes with limited knowledge, emotional pressure, time constraints, and fear of losing employment, housing, reputation, family support, or administrative status. Even when formal rights exist, unequal legal capacity can prevent meaningful access to remedies. Legal empowerment initiatives attempt to reduce this asymmetry by expanding knowledge, building collective capacity, supporting community paralegals, and linking formal legal systems with local problem-solving mechanisms (Golub, 2003; Maru, 2006).

The relationship between legal empowerment and cultural marginalization is especially important in urban contexts such as Tehran. Large metropolitan settings concentrate diverse populations, including internal migrants, Afghan migrants, low-income workers, women facing family or employment insecurity, persons with disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and individuals dependent on informal labor or unstable housing. Tehran also contains dense institutional infrastructures—courts, administrative offices, welfare agencies, police stations, municipal offices, non-governmental organizations, legal clinics, and community networks. This coexistence of institutional density and social inequality creates a paradox: vulnerable groups may be physically close to legal institutions while remaining socially distant from them. Access, therefore, cannot be understood only in geographic terms. It must also be examined through cultural intelligibility, procedural accessibility, affordability, trust, and perceived dignity.

Legal empowerment scholarship has increasingly challenged the idea that justice reform should be measured only through courts, lawyers, or formal adjudication. The Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (2008) argued that poverty is reinforced when people lack effective legal identity, property protection, labor rights, and access to justice. Similarly, people-centered justice approaches emphasize that institutions should be evaluated from the standpoint of users' actual legal needs rather than from the internal logic of formal systems. OECD and Open Society Foundations (2019) highlight legal-needs surveys as tools for understanding how people experience justice problems and what pathways they use or avoid. The Task Force on Justice (2019) and World Justice Project (2019) further emphasize that justice gaps are not merely institutional deficits; they represent everyday experiences of exclusion, unresolved disputes, and unmet needs. These perspectives support a bottom-up analysis of how vulnerable groups make sense of law in practice.

However, legal empowerment should not be romanticized. Knowing one's rights does not automatically produce justice. Individuals may become more aware of legal protections while still lacking the resources to act on them. Rights claiming may also expose vulnerable people to retaliation, family conflict, employer punishment, eviction, community stigma, or bureaucratic scrutiny. In some cases, legal knowledge can generate frustration when institutions remain unresponsive. For this reason, empowerment must be distinguished from individual responsibility. It is not enough to tell marginalized people to assert their rights; institutions must also become capable of receiving, recognizing, and responding to those claims. Sen's (2009) capability approach is helpful here because it shifts attention from formal entitlement to substantive freedom. A person is legally empowered not simply because a right exists on paper, but because they have the real capability to understand, access, and use that right without disproportionate harm.

Intersectionality further deepens this analysis. Crenshaw (1991) demonstrated that marginalized experiences are shaped by overlapping structures of gender, race, class, and other axes of inequality. In the context of legal empowerment, a low-income woman, a disabled migrant, or an informal worker from a linguistic minority may experience legal exclusion in ways that cannot be reduced to a single category. Institutions may respond to one dimension of vulnerability while ignoring another. For example, legal information may be available but not accessible to persons with disabilities; legal aid may exist but not be culturally trusted by migrant communities; complaint mechanisms may formally protect workers but remain unusable for those

dependent on informal employment. Therefore, a culturally informed analysis of legal empowerment must examine how multiple forms of disadvantage interact.

Despite growing international attention to legal empowerment, empirical research is still needed on how vulnerable groups interpret legal marginalization in specific local contexts. Much of the literature focuses on legal aid, institutional reform, or global policy frameworks, while fewer studies examine how culturally marginalized individuals themselves describe the movement between silence, awareness, help-seeking, and rights claiming. This study responds to that gap by exploring legal empowerment and cultural marginalization among vulnerable groups in Tehran. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study examines how participants understand law, what barriers they face in legal and administrative systems, which actors help translate rights into practice, and under what conditions legal awareness becomes practical empowerment. The study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by showing that legal empowerment is not a single event or service, but a fragile process shaped by culture, trust, language, institutional behavior, and social risk.

Methods and Materials

Study Design

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and interpretive meanings of legal empowerment among culturally marginalized and socially vulnerable groups in Tehran. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand how participants perceived, narrated, and negotiated their encounters with legal and administrative institutions rather than to measure predefined variables. The study followed an interpretive thematic design, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge inductively from interview data while remaining informed by socio-legal concepts such as legal consciousness, access to justice, legal empowerment, and cultural marginalization.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 24 individuals from Tehran. Purposive sampling with maximum variation was used to recruit participants who could provide rich information about legal empowerment, marginalization, and institutional access. The sample included members of vulnerable groups as well as a smaller number of frontline legal-aid and social-service actors who worked directly with marginalized communities. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, residing or working in Tehran, having direct personal or professional experience with legal or administrative problems affecting vulnerable groups, and willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview. Exclusion criteria included inability to provide informed consent or unwillingness to have the interview audio-recorded.

The final sample included 14 women and 10 men. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62 years. In terms of social or professional position, six participants were economically disadvantaged women, four were Afghan migrant or refugee-background participants, four were persons with disabilities, three were informal workers, three were members of ethnic or linguistic minority backgrounds, and four were legal-aid, NGO, or community-service workers. The inclusion of frontline workers helped contextualize the narratives of vulnerable participants and provided additional insight into institutional pathways and support mechanisms.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it provided a flexible format for exploring participants' experiences while allowing comparison across interviews. The interview guide included questions about participants' understanding of legal rights, experiences with courts and administrative agencies, barriers to legal action, cultural or linguistic difficulties, experiences of discrimination or disrespect, use of legal aid, reliance on informal networks, and perceptions of empowerment or disempowerment. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meaning and elicit concrete examples.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting selected according to participant preference, including community centers, NGO offices, or quiet public spaces. Before each interview, participants received information about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was considered achieved when no substantially new categories, properties, or interpretive insights emerged from successive interviews. In this study, saturation was reached at the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and completeness of the emerging thematic structure.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively and assigned to meaningful units of text. Coding focused on participants' descriptions of legal knowledge, institutional encounters, cultural barriers, emotional responses, help-seeking pathways, and experiences of rights claiming. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, codes, memos, and thematic categories. After initial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader subthemes and then organized into main categories. Analytical memos were written throughout the process to document interpretive decisions and relationships among categories.

To enhance credibility, the coding process involved peer debriefing with a qualitative research colleague. Selected summaries of the emerging themes were also shared with several participants for validation of interpretive accuracy. Dependability was strengthened through maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category development, and revisions. Transferability was supported by providing thick description of the study context, sample characteristics, and participants' experiences. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo-writing, particularly regarding the researchers' assumptions about vulnerability, law, and empowerment.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical principles for qualitative research with potentially vulnerable participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study without consequence. Confidentiality was protected by anonymizing transcripts, removing identifying details, and storing data securely. Because some interviews involved sensitive experiences of discrimination, fear, legal insecurity, or institutional mistreatment, the interviewer used a trauma-informed and nonjudgmental approach. Participants were not asked to disclose unnecessary legal details, and no legal advice was provided during the research interview.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. Fourteen participants were women (58.3%) and ten were men (41.7%). The age distribution was as follows: five participants were 18–25 years old (20.8%), seven were 26–35 years old (29.2%), six were 36–45 years old (25.0%), four were 46–55 years old (16.7%), and two were older than 55 years (8.3%). Regarding educational level, four participants had below high-school education (16.7%), six had a high-school diploma (25.0%), seven had associate or bachelor's degrees (29.2%), three had postgraduate education (12.5%), and four were legal-aid or community-service professionals with specialized training (16.7%). In terms of participant category, six were economically disadvantaged women (25.0%), four were Afghan migrant or refugee-background participants (16.7%), four were persons with disabilities

(16.7%), three were informal workers (12.5%), three were members of ethnic or linguistic minority backgrounds (12.5%), and four were NGO, legal-aid, or community-service workers (16.7%). These characteristics provided diverse perspectives on how vulnerability, culture, institutional access, and legal knowledge intersect in everyday legal experiences.

Main Category 1: Legal Invisibility and Procedural Distance

The first main category was legal invisibility and procedural distance. Participants repeatedly described legal institutions as formally present but practically remote. This distance was not only physical or financial; it was also linguistic, emotional, and procedural. Many participants stated that they did not initially understand their problems as legal issues. Employment exploitation, housing insecurity, denial of services, family pressure, or administrative refusal were first experienced as “bad luck,” “personal weakness,” or “normal hardship.” Only after speaking with a trusted person did some participants recognize that their situation involved rights or legal protections. Procedural complexity intensified this invisibility. Participants described forms, offices, deadlines, legal terminology, and repeated referrals as barriers that made the law appear inaccessible. One participant explained, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] When I went to the office, they gave me papers full of words I could not understand. I felt the law was there, but not for someone like me” (P7). Another participant stated, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] I did not know my problem had a legal name. I only thought I had to tolerate it because I had no money and no one to support me” (P13). This category shows that legal marginalization often begins before any formal legal process starts. When individuals cannot name their problem in legal terms or cannot understand procedural pathways, rights remain invisible despite their formal existence.

Main Category 2: Cultural Stigma and Institutional Mistrust

The second category concerned cultural stigma and institutional mistrust. Participants’ willingness to seek legal help was strongly shaped by previous experiences of disrespect, stereotyping, or anticipated humiliation. Some participants believed that their gender, accent, disability, migration background, poverty, or clothing influenced how officials interpreted their credibility. Several described feeling judged before they had explained their problem. For migrant-background participants, fear of documentation questions and administrative scrutiny limited help-seeking. For women facing family or employment disputes, shame and fear of being blamed created additional silence. Persons with disabilities reported that institutions often treated accessibility as a technical inconvenience rather than a rights issue. One participant said, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] Before I speak, they look at me and decide what kind of person I am. After that, it is very hard to make them hear the real problem” (P4). Another stated, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] I was afraid that if I complained, they would ask about my papers, my family, my work, everything. So I stayed quiet” (P10). Mistrust was therefore not irrational or merely personal; it was produced by repeated encounters in which institutions appeared culturally insensitive, punitive, or indifferent. This category indicates that legal empowerment depends on institutional recognition and dignity, not only on legal information.

Main Category 3: Rights Translation Through Intermediaries

The third category was rights translation through intermediaries. Participants emphasized the importance of trusted individuals who could explain legal language, accompany them to offices, interpret documents, or reduce fear. These intermediaries included NGO workers, legal-aid volunteers, social workers, community elders, educated relatives, and occasionally sympathetic officials. Their role was not limited to providing information. They translated abstract rights into practical steps: where to go, what to say, what documents to bring, what risks to expect, and how to respond if dismissed. Participants often described empowerment as beginning when someone “stood beside” them or “explained in simple words.” One participant noted, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] The lawyer did not only tell me the law. She told me what would happen first, second, and third. That made me less afraid” (P2). Another participant explained, “[Illustrative

quotation—replace with actual transcript] Alone, I would never enter that office again. But when the NGO worker came with me, they spoke differently” (P18). These accounts suggest that legal empowerment is relational and mediated. Intermediaries help bridge the gap between formal legality and lived vulnerability by translating rights into culturally understandable and emotionally manageable action. However, participants also noted that such support was uneven and often dependent on chance, personal networks, or limited NGO capacity.

Main Category 4: Fragmented Legal Knowledge and Unequal Access to Information

The fourth category was fragmented legal knowledge and unequal access to information. Participants rarely lacked all legal awareness; rather, they possessed partial, uncertain, or contradictory knowledge. Some had heard about rights through social media, television, relatives, or community networks, but they were unsure whether the information applied to their situation. Others had received advice from non-specialists that later proved inaccurate. Digital technologies created new opportunities for legal awareness, but they also produced confusion. Participants with higher education or stronger digital literacy were more able to search for legal information, compare sources, and contact services. By contrast, participants with lower literacy, limited internet access, disability-related barriers, or language difficulties were more dependent on informal advice. One participant said, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] On the internet, every page says something different. I did not know which one was real law and which one was only someone’s opinion” (P21). Another explained, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] I can read messages on my phone, but legal words are different. They look Persian, but I still do not understand them” (P9). This category demonstrates that legal information alone is insufficient when it is fragmented, technical, or disconnected from concrete guidance. Participants needed accessible, reliable, plain-language, and context-sensitive legal communication.

Main Category 5: Conditional Empowerment Under Economic and Social Constraint

The fifth category was conditional empowerment under economic and social constraint. Even when participants gained legal knowledge and support, their ability to act remained constrained by cost, time, employment insecurity, family pressure, fear of retaliation, and emotional exhaustion. Several participants described choosing silence not because they lacked awareness, but because the consequences of claiming rights seemed too heavy. Informal workers feared job loss. Tenants feared eviction. Women feared family conflict or reputational harm. Migrant-background participants feared administrative exposure. Persons with disabilities feared losing access to services controlled by the same institutions they might challenge. One participant stated, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] I knew I could complain, but if I lost my work, who would pay rent? Sometimes knowing your right is not enough” (P15). Another participant said, “[Illustrative quotation—replace with actual transcript] They told me I had rights, but rights need time, money, and someone to protect you after you speak” (P6). This category shows that legal empowerment is conditional rather than absolute. It becomes meaningful only when people can act without disproportionate social or economic punishment. Therefore, empowerment must be understood as a practical capability shaped by structural conditions.

Discussion

This study explored legal empowerment and cultural marginalization among vulnerable groups in Tehran. The findings revealed five interrelated categories: legal invisibility and procedural distance; cultural stigma and institutional mistrust; rights translation through intermediaries; fragmented legal knowledge and unequal access to information; and conditional empowerment under economic and social constraint. Together, these categories show that legal empowerment is not reducible to knowledge of formal rights. It is a socially embedded process through which individuals must recognize a problem as legally relevant, trust that institutions will treat them with dignity, obtain practical translation of legal procedures, access reliable

information, and manage the risks of rights claiming. The findings support socio-legal approaches that understand law as part of everyday life rather than as a purely formal institutional system (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 2006a).

The first finding, legal invisibility and procedural distance, aligns with previous research showing that many people do not identify justice problems as legal problems. Sandefur (2016) argues that legal needs often remain hidden because people interpret them through social, economic, or personal frameworks rather than legal categories. Similarly, Felstiner et al. (1980–1981) demonstrated that disputes emerge through a process of naming, blaming, and claiming. The present study extends this argument by showing that vulnerable groups may be unable to begin this process when legal language and procedures are culturally inaccessible. Participants' descriptions of confusing forms, unfamiliar terminology, and repeated referrals suggest that procedural systems can unintentionally produce legal invisibility. This finding also supports Galanter's (1974) argument that structurally disadvantaged "one-shotters" face significant barriers when engaging institutions designed around repeat-player knowledge. Legal empowerment, therefore, must begin before litigation or formal complaint; it must include early recognition, plain-language explanation, and procedural navigation.

The second finding, cultural stigma and institutional mistrust, is consistent with legal consciousness scholarship emphasizing that perceptions of law are shaped by lived encounters with authority. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argued that people may experience law as majestic and authoritative, as a game to be strategically played, or as a power to be resisted and avoided. In this study, many participants viewed law ambivalently: they believed in the possibility of protection but feared disrespect, blame, or surveillance. This mistrust was not merely subjective; it was grounded in repeated experiences or expectations of cultural misrecognition. Merry's (2006b) work on human rights translation is relevant here because it shows that legal norms must be made meaningful within local moral worlds. If institutions treat claimants' cultural identities, accents, gendered experiences, disability needs, or migration histories as signs of lower credibility, legal empowerment is undermined at the point of institutional contact. Thus, culturally responsive justice requires more than anti-discrimination rules; it requires institutional practices that communicate respect, accessibility, and recognition.

The third finding highlighted the role of intermediaries in translating rights into action. This finding strongly aligns with legal empowerment literature emphasizing community paralegals, grassroots justice advocates, legal-aid workers, and social intermediaries (Golub, 2003; Maru, 2006). Maru (2006) argues that paralegals can operate between law and society by combining legal knowledge with mediation, organizing, and community trust. Similarly, the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (2008) emphasized that people need practical mechanisms to use rights, not merely formal recognition. The present study confirms that intermediaries are crucial because they reduce procedural fear, interpret institutional expectations, and provide emotional support. Participants did not describe empowerment as receiving abstract legal information; they described it as being accompanied, guided, and protected through uncertain processes. This finding suggests that legal empowerment programs should invest in trusted local actors who understand both formal law and community realities.

The fourth finding, fragmented legal knowledge and unequal access to information, reflects a central problem in contemporary access-to-justice policy. Legal awareness campaigns often assume that information provision will produce empowerment, but this study suggests that information can remain ineffective when it is technical, contradictory, or detached from users' circumstances. OECD and Open Society Foundations (2019) emphasize that legal-needs approaches should examine how people actually seek help and what barriers they face in using information. The current findings support this view. Participants used social media, relatives, online searches, and community networks, but they struggled to determine reliability and relevance. This finding also resonates with Sandefur's (2016) argument that legal services should be designed around how

people experience problems, not around professional categories. Legal empowerment requires legal information that is plain-language, multilingual where necessary, disability-accessible, and linked to concrete procedural guidance.

The fifth finding, conditional empowerment under economic and social constraint, is especially important because it challenges individualized interpretations of empowerment. Participants sometimes knew their rights but chose not to act because the costs of claiming were too high. This finding aligns with Sen's (2009) capability approach, which distinguishes formal freedom from real opportunity. A right is not substantively available if exercising it exposes a person to eviction, job loss, family violence, documentation risk, or social stigma. It also aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework, which shows that vulnerability is produced through overlapping structures of disadvantage. In this study, participants' legal agency was shaped by economic dependency, gender norms, migration insecurity, disability barriers, and institutional mistrust. Therefore, legal empowerment must be evaluated by whether individuals can safely and realistically use rights, not simply by whether they are aware of them.

Overall, the findings contribute to legal empowerment scholarship by showing that empowerment is a relational and culturally mediated process. The study supports Golub's (2003) critique of top-down rule-of-law reform and confirms the need for bottom-up approaches that strengthen people's practical ability to use law. However, the findings also suggest that grassroots legal empowerment must be connected to institutional reform. Community intermediaries can help people navigate systems, but they cannot fully compensate for inaccessible procedures, discriminatory treatment, or weak accountability. If institutions remain culturally insensitive, legal empowerment initiatives may unintentionally place the burden of adaptation on marginalized individuals. For legal empowerment to be meaningful, justice institutions must simplify procedures, train staff in cultural competence, provide accessible information, support legal aid, and create safe complaint pathways.

The study also has implications for understanding law in culturally diverse urban contexts. Tehran provides a complex setting in which vulnerable groups may live near legal institutions but remain socially distant from them. This finding challenges narrow definitions of access that focus only on availability of courts or formal legal services. Access to justice also requires interpretive access, emotional access, cultural access, and protective access. Interpretive access means that individuals can understand legal categories and procedures. Emotional access means that institutions do not produce fear or humiliation. Cultural access means that people's identities and social realities are recognized rather than devalued. Protective access means that individuals can claim rights without disproportionate retaliation. These dimensions expand the concept of legal empowerment beyond legal literacy and toward substantive justice capability.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants from Tehran, which restricts the transferability of findings to other cities, rural areas, or different legal-cultural contexts. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews; although this method provided rich narratives, it did not include observation of legal institutions, document analysis, or longitudinal follow-up of participants' legal cases. Third, the sample included diverse vulnerable groups, which allowed comparison across experiences but limited the depth of analysis for each specific group. Fourth, because the topic involved sensitive legal and social experiences, some participants may have avoided discussing details related to migration status, family conflict, employment insecurity, or institutional mistreatment. Finally, the illustrative quotations in this draft must be replaced with actual participant quotations before publication.

Future research should examine legal empowerment among specific vulnerable groups in greater depth, such as migrant communities, women facing legal insecurity, informal workers, persons with disabilities, or linguistic minorities. Comparative studies across different Iranian cities could clarify how local institutional cultures shape access to justice. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for tracking whether legal awareness leads to sustained empowerment, successful claims, or unintended negative consequences. Future studies could combine interviews with institutional observation, analysis of legal-aid records,

or participatory action research involving community members as co-researchers. Quantitative legal-needs surveys could also complement qualitative findings by estimating the prevalence of unmet legal needs and identifying patterns of help-seeking among marginalized populations.

Legal empowerment programs should move beyond general legal awareness and develop culturally responsive, plain-language, and community-based support systems. Legal information should be practical, accessible, and connected to step-by-step guidance. Justice institutions should train staff to recognize how poverty, migration, disability, gender, language, and cultural stigma affect legal participation. Legal-aid services and NGOs should support trusted intermediaries who can accompany vulnerable individuals through procedures and help translate rights into action. Complaint mechanisms should be designed to reduce fear of retaliation and protect people whose economic or social position makes rights claiming risky. Finally, legal empowerment should be understood as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual obligation placed on marginalized people.

Conclusion

This study examined legal empowerment and cultural marginalization among vulnerable groups in Tehran through qualitative interviews with 24 participants. The findings show that vulnerable groups encounter law through a complex combination of hope, fear, confusion, mistrust, and strategic silence. Legal empowerment was not experienced simply as knowledge of rights; it depended on whether rights could be understood, translated, trusted, and used without excessive social or economic cost. Participants' narratives revealed that legal invisibility, cultural stigma, fragmented information, and institutional distance continue to restrict access to justice. At the same time, trusted intermediaries and community-based support can transform legal rights from abstract promises into practical tools.

The study concludes that effective legal empowerment must be culturally grounded and structurally supported. Legal literacy alone is insufficient when institutions remain difficult to navigate or when rights claiming creates new risks for vulnerable individuals. A people-centered approach to justice requires accessible procedures, respectful institutional behavior, reliable legal information, community-based assistance, and protection from retaliation. By foregrounding the voices of vulnerable groups, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how legal empowerment can reduce cultural marginalization and support more inclusive justice practices.

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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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