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# Communicating Legal Rights to Vulnerable Populations

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## ABSTRACT

Effective communication of legal rights is fundamental to justice, yet many vulnerable populations remain excluded due to systemic, linguistic, cognitive, or technological barriers. This paper examines the complex dimensions of vulnerability and examines how marginalized individuals, including those with low literacy, communication disabilities, or limited language proficiency, struggle to access justice. Drawing from international conventions, behavioral science, legal advocacy, and technological innovation, the paper highlights strategies such as peer modeling, digital platforms, community engagement, and adaptive legal training. Case studies, particularly involving immigrant and refugee women, demonstrate the dire consequences of miscommunication or exclusion from legal systems. Policy recommendations emphasize the necessity of inclusive frameworks, training for legal professionals, and culturally sensitive outreach. Ultimately, improving communication of legal rights demands a multidisciplinary approach that acknowledges and addresses the intersecting forms of disadvantage that perpetuate legal invisibility for vulnerable groups.

**Keywords:** Vulnerable populations; legal rights; access to justice; communication strategies; legal advocacy; disability rights; legal literacy; community engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

In many jurisdictions, legal documents and processes make no allowance for the understanding and participation of vulnerable populations. In civil matters, these can include those with low literacy or education levels and those with language, intellectual, psychosocial, or communication disabilities. In the criminal justice system, it can first include victims/survivors of crime and witnesses who are children or those with low literacy or education levels, language disabilities, intellectual disabilities, psychosocial disabilities, communication disabilities, or any combination of these. In poorer jurisdictions, languages with little or no legal recognition are also excluded, along with all those who have not learned the language of the law. In truth, it is inappropriate to regard this group as a separate population. Rather, they comprise a very substantial segment of the population, which is left bereft of legal rights and protections in the absence of effective communication access. For many years, agencies involved in supporting vulnerable populations in South Australia have been engaged in developing capacity and providing materials and processes designed to address legal rights among victims and witnesses of crime. Those efforts have been impeded by the lack of a legal framework for adapting communications about legal rights and processes. An important goal in advocating for law reform around communication access to the courts is to improve implementation of the current framework – legislation that requires provision of materials and processes capable of being understood and used by vulnerable populations. In this regard, the exploitation of these vulnerabilities can have disastrous consequences. For instance, child victims of crime have taken their own lives in light of abuse that went uninvestigated and unprosecuted [1, 2].

### Understanding Vulnerable Populations

Defining Vulnerable Populations. Communities with a history of oppression are often at risk of rights violations and exclusion from decision-making. Vulnerable populations are defined by conditions that limit their ability to consent to treatment or understand their role in research. These include individuals who lack understanding of informed decision-making, do not observe social norms, or are susceptible to coercion. The concept of vulnerability emerged from the need to protect groups whose rights have been violated. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

widely abused. In medical research ethics, vulnerable groups include children, pregnant women, prisoners, and those with limited English proficiency. However, vulnerability can extend beyond these categories, prompting practitioners to assess specific instances of vulnerability. It encompasses a wide range of biological, social, and environmental attributes and exists along a spectrum from low to high vulnerability. When an individual's ability to participate without causing harm is compromised, they are deemed vulnerable. Vulnerability is not absolute; instead, any population at risk of harm from various factors qualifies as vulnerable. Factors contributing to vulnerability generally fall into three categories: biological, environmental, and social. Environmental issues like flooding and pollution may increase vulnerability through health risks, while inadequate medical care or lax regulations can leave populations in cities more susceptible to health complications. Social constructs, such as immigration status and discrimination, can limit healthcare access, leading to untreated health issues. Various social influences, including poverty, lack of education, and unemployment, further exacerbate vulnerability. Additionally, biological factors, such as genetic predisposition and environmental health risks, contribute significantly to a population's vulnerability. Therefore, vulnerability involves more than just susceptibility to health outcomes; multiple factors must intersect to create it [3, 4].

### **Legal Rights Overview**

Organizations working with vulnerable adults at risk of violence have specific obligations framed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These legal obligations help clarify the connection between rights-based advocacy and legal responsibilities outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Organizations must provide mechanisms for individuals to know their rights and complaint processes if these rights are violated. CRPD mandates that States Parties ensure everyone understands their rights, including access to information about services and their rights in humanitarian responses. They must prevent disability discrimination and create supportive environments for women, girls, and refugees with disabilities. Access to communication must be ensured for women with disabilities at risk of violence. States Parties are urged to eliminate barriers for rural and refugee women and girls with disabilities. Advocacy with decision-makers is essential for compliance with these responsibilities. The overview summarizes rights from the CRPD, which defines "persons with disabilities" as anyone with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. It emphasizes the equal exercise of rights and the obligations of States. Humanitarian responses must adhere to the CRPD, maintaining independent protection and safety mechanisms [5, 6].

### **Communication Strategies**

Public defenders and public station attorneys receive training on due process rights, but effective communication of these rights is often overlooked. Four promising strategies for improvement include two general and two technology-based approaches. This review is not exhaustive but highlights effective communication methods for the legal context. Two notable strategies in behavior change literature are the "nudge" and "peer modeling" approaches. Nudging, often used in public health, involves subtle presentation changes to encourage certain choices without limiting options. For instance, re-positioning COVID-19 information in more frequented areas serves as a nudge, influencing how people perceive their prevention behaviors. Furthermore, nudges that avoid overt persuasion can effectively alter behavior by changing information encoding in the mind. Technology-based strategies include a training video for attorneys showcasing the importance of rights communication and a smartphone app for rights awareness. The video concept integrates peer modeling and "how-to" animations, featuring short clips that demonstrate effective attorney-client communication about detainees' rights. These resources aim to expose public defenders to a variety of communication tactics they may not have previously considered, fostering positive behavioral shifts [7, 8].

### **Community Engagement**

Vulnerable populations struggle to express their legal concerns and protect their rights in civil and human rights contexts, making effective outreach essential for accessing knowledge about their legal rights. Such outreach aims to ensure targeted groups are aware of their rights while cultivating their ability to assert them independently. Various outreach forms include community events, door-to-door canvassing, workshops, and professional trainings, chosen based on the initiative and the specific demographic, as different populations may respond differently. Legal concepts often feel foreign to vulnerable groups, leading to limited or distorted understanding. Therefore, outreach efforts must communicate legal information clearly and without jargon. Grounding legal concepts in everyday terms aids comprehension, and interactive explanations allow for questions and clarifications. Effective outreach addresses potential responses to legal queries, further clarifying the process. It's vital that the target audience recognizes the validity of their claims and considers legal action, as skepticism and low self-

efficacy can hinder engagement with legal issues. Raising awareness of the consequences of inaction and demonstrating the steps to build agency empowers populations to overcome reluctance. Support in taking the initial step is critical for fostering self-efficacy and encouraging empowerment [9, 10].

### Case Studies

Every day, immigrant or refugee women face barriers when attempting to access legal rights, services, or protections. These case studies illustrate some of the complex ways in which those barriers manifest and affect women who have experienced domestic violence. They present real stories of women who dealt with the law firm, the personnel at the chosen location, and the legal system. Each case highlights a need felt within some immigrant communities for better access to information about the legal options available following an experience of domestic violence. Each case is followed by discussion questions to prompt reflection and conversation around the larger implications for legal services, protections, and rights for immigrant and refugee women beyond the specific case. Imagine a man who, a few minutes after marrying a woman, took away her passport and prevented her from having any contact with her family and friends. In August 2004, Sharan and her husband Brian, who bought a car, landed at the Toronto Airport. Once they arrived at Brian's house, the abuse began. The husband would break his wife's looks and self-confidence every day, and in 2007, the police were called for the first time. Brian obeyed, but after being released from the police station, the worst abuse began. Sharan moved to a shelter, and the police charged Brian with three assault charges, of which he was found guilty. The next day, because Sharan was not protected under the reasons for protection, he took a leave of absence to a different nation. Brian's solicitors encouraged Sharan to contact the authorities of that nation, knowing there was no framework to protect her. In 2009, Brian returned to Canada with the police and Sharan constantly. Brian met somebody else and had a child with her, and violence against Sharan began again, to which police officers repeatedly responded. In 2012, Sharan attempted to arrive at her ex-husband's house with the police for child custody, but no police officers helped. In 2013, a new immigration and refugee office was opened, which had the authority to receive spousal sponsorship applications from all groups of people, including Muslims. A hearing was scheduled and accepted after a lengthy wait, and without telling anybody, Sharan's friend called the police. While he was in the corner, Sharan ran away, thinking things would be better. However, it was a violent relationship [11, 12].

### Policy Implications

Events leading to and surrounding bureaucratic and legal processes can make a person feel vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by State processes or powerful agents. The consequences of bureaucratic injustice experienced in mainstream society are compounded when one must interact with advocacy or legal systems, or in jurisdictions where accessibility is a concern, due to a person's non-standard communication abilities. Bureaucratic justice, anticipated to assist and empower, can sometimes initiate traumatic political experiences that severely traumatise a person, resulting in silence, withdrawal, and a failure to access necessary support services. Critically structured accounts of advocacy and legal processes by those who know them well or have required assistance best help vulnerable individuals, service professionals, and designers of supporting ethical and technology-based processes. Details of processes and consequences can then be better known, explained, and discussed. Scopophilia, voyeurism, and perverse desire may inform the development of legal processes, requiring remedies to ensure designers are empowered to do their best for vulnerable individuals. Law, like bureaucracy, can be blurry, changing, and complex, saddled with much bureaucratic baggage from both legacy and the future. Access to justice, the notion that all should be provided access to courts and other legal instruments to address wrongs, is both legally mandated and pragmatically contested. For instance, interpreters of different abilities are mandated, but their role in discussions with victims of exploitation must be clearer to determine fairness and to ensure all agencies act ethically and as expected. Diminishing or constraining access to courts through the removal of services must be contestable and better explained to potential victims, and solutions proposed remedially. Warnings that some instruments may be oppressive, such as certain levels of prison invisibility, may need to be as clear as those that explain dangers [13, 14].

### Training and Capacity Building

In addition to adapting the legal rights messages and materials, consideration should also be given to ensuring that those who will be communicating the information are ready and prepared to do so in ways that are meaningful and relevant for vulnerable populations. This may involve a variety of activities, including orientation prior to the community dissemination sessions or workshops, and capacity-building and skills training activities to prepare those who will be communicating the adapted texts and messages. Specific content for capacity building and training could include, among others: a discussion on why a variety of methods would be used to reach different audiences; creating awareness of practical difficulties

in local settings; as well as discussion on methods such as role plays and examples of past experiences in terms of best practices, lessons learned and challenges. The goal of the capacity building and training is to ensure that briefings and dissemination meetings are conducted in a meaningful manner, taking into account cultural sensitivities, structural and systemic challenges in local contexts that may facilitate or prevent effective communication of legal rights information. To this end, it is important to select capacity-building and skills training activities that acknowledge and build on the capacity of the intended audience. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is an agreed-upon method for gathering information about knowledge, opinions, and beliefs about a specific problem. By bringing together a small group of individuals, and adopting an informal atmosphere, and favorable group dynamics, it allows exploration of information that may not have been anticipated in advance, as well as cross-examination of ideas. While FGDs may serve as valuable tools for assessment, they often have limitations as vehicles for training purposes. In particular, training of a broader audience becomes extremely impractical. Moreover, while discussion may be an effective means for exploring difficult or uncomfortable subjects, it can limit illustrations of role-play techniques and a practice-audiences approach. There are a number of methods that can be used as capacity-building and training components. Training is best viewed as a mix that can take into account the audience's unique interests and cultural characteristics. Some of the accepted methods that could be used in various combinations include: Briefings/Presentations, Motivational Speeches, Group Discussion, Reflection, Games, Simulations, Forum Theatre, Peer Teaching, and Dramas [15, 16].

### Measuring Effectiveness

When vulnerable people are faced with a legal issue, it can be unclear where to turn for help, especially in a new environment. In many cases, professionals on the frontline are not lawyers, or their services are simply unaffordable. There is a strong need for legal information that enables users to understand what the law is, how it may apply to their situation, and which authorities they may turn to, to enable them to better help themselves. Online legal information provision is booming, but it is often unclear whether these interventions are effective. This is particularly important when considering that vulnerable populations may be less likely to access information about their rights or how to redress violations of those rights. This short reflection describes the setup and findings of an experimental study conducted in Greece as part of Messenger4All, a scale-up of a legal aid chatbot that assists asylum applicants. This study seeks to better understand the information needs of vulnerable populations, evaluate the impact of a legal information intervention, and develop recommendations for the future design of such interventions. Legal information provision via chat is implemented as a new channel that facilitates personalized communication analogous to human professionals. Combining check-up messages with help-seeking questions enables greater engagement and curates user journeys for vulnerable users. In contrast to legal chatbots that triage needs, Messenger4All answers factual questions from unmatched service user groups via FAQ-automated chatbots. By sending chat invitations for tailor-made "legal check-ups" to newly arrived asylum applicants, various forms of personalized legal information provision can be evaluated against a control group that received generic information. The experimental design enables baseline balance for covariates paired with intent-to-treat analysis and group comparisons. Messenger4All adopts a pure-RCT design, but with the insights generated from the qualitative evaluation in Greece, additional use cases aimed at specific user groups will be piloted and rigorously evaluated [17, 18].

### Future Directions

Efforts to improve communication of legal rights to vulnerable populations should be diligent. Recommendations for action on different fronts are set out below. 1. Continue evaluation. As this paper has shown, communication of rights is myriad and diverse. Even the strongest, most positive outcomes are fragile and limited in ways that can only be discerned with time and assessment. Continued effort is needed to consolidate, support, and further enhance these promising sequences. Through persistent refinement, either replicable or regionally-adaptable models can emerge, which will increase the global likelihood of successful rights communication methods being detected, adapted, and applied more widely. 2. Increase understanding of vulnerability. The challenges of informing people in precarious situations of their rights have been largely ignored. For the communication of legal rights efforts to reach the most marginalised members of society, more understanding of these populations is needed. Some research has started to reveal the legal vulnerabilities of different groups of people: more work is needed to assess the wider, more holistic vulnerabilities of these groups. 3. Conduct comparative research. With very few exceptions, there is little comparative analysis of successful initiatives (including the communication of rights about broader issues, including health care, housing, benefits, safety, etc). In an increasingly globalised world, it is critical to draw on models of success from beyond national borders, and

independent, comparative analysis ought to be promoted. 4. Improve rights communication support. The most effective initiatives have been done by human rights advocates and collaborators, often working on shoestring budgets. Independently funded rights communication initiatives ought to be evaluated and shared; the public sectors in donor countries could specifically set up a fund to support such initiatives in targeted countries, or human rights-based or community-based organisations receiving outside support could be encouraged to develop their initiatives and foster outside partnerships [19-22].

### CONCLUSION

Vulnerable populations face compounded challenges in understanding and asserting their legal rights, often resulting in systemic injustice and exploitation. As this paper demonstrates, ensuring equitable access to legal information requires more than legal reform; it calls for deliberate, adaptive, and context-sensitive communication strategies. From behavioral nudges to mobile legal aid apps, from peer-based training to multilingual outreach, successful models emphasize accessibility, inclusivity, and empowerment. Legal practitioners, policymakers, and advocates must invest in capacity building and co-designed interventions that resonate with the lived realities of marginalized individuals. Moreover, sustained monitoring and comparative evaluations are essential to refine approaches and foster global learning. By centering the voices and needs of vulnerable populations, justice systems can evolve into spaces of genuine protection and participation where rights are not merely inscribed in law but communicated, understood, and upheld in practice.

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