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Paralegals as Agents of Legal Empowerment: Bridging Access to Justice and Maqasid al-Shariah in Rural Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Access to justice for underprivileged communities remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, including Indonesia, where economic constraints, limited legal literacy, and restricted access to formal legal institutions hinder the realization of legal rights. While prior studies have examined legal empowerment and access to justice, they largely overlook the integration of Islamic normative frameworks, particularly Maqasid al-Shariah, within empirical community-based practices. This study addresses this gap by examining the role of paralegals as agents of legal empowerment in rural contexts and analyzing how their practices bridge access to justice and maqasid-oriented values. Using a qualitative empirical case study design, this research was conducted in Tlogosari Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency, involving purposively selected participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic coding based on the Miles and Huberman model. The findings show that paralegals perform multidimensional roles as legal educators, mediators, and facilitators, prioritizing non-litigation mechanisms, participatory legal education, and community-based strategies. These approaches enhance the availability, accessibility, affordability, and effectiveness of legal services for marginalized groups. Moreover, paralegal practices substantively reflect maqasid principles, particularly in safeguarding life, property, and intellect, thereby extending justice beyond procedural dimensions toward human welfare. This study introduces Islamic Social Justice as a novel framework integrating legal empowerment, access to justice, and Islamic ethical principles, offering a context-sensitive and inclusive model for strengthening equitable legal systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to justice has become a central concern in contemporary legal scholarship, particularly in the context of developing countries where structural inequalities continue to hinder the realization of legal rights. Although the principle of equality before the law is universally recognized, its practical implementation remains deeply uneven. In many societies, legal systems are formally inclusive but substantively inaccessible, especially for underprivileged communities facing economic hardship, geographical isolation, and limited legal literacy (Al-Shuqairat et al., 2025). This discrepancy between normative guarantees and empirical realities underscores a persistent global challenge: how to transform legal rights into effective access for marginalized populations (Medda-Windischer et al., 2023).

The concept of access to justice has undergone significant evolution since its early formulation. Initially, it was narrowly understood as access to courts and legal representation, focusing primarily on removing financial barriers through legal aid. This perspective was prominently articulated by Mauro Cappelletti and Bryant Garth, who framed access to justice as a foundational element of the rule of law and equality before the law (Cappelletti et al., 1982). However, subsequent developments expanded the concept to include broader institutional reforms, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and community-based legal services (Abidin, 2025). This shift reflects a growing awareness that formal legal institutions alone are insufficient to address the complex socio-legal needs of marginalized communities.

In Indonesia, the state has formally embraced the principle of access to justice through constitutional and legislative frameworks. The 1945 Constitution guarantees equality before the law, while Law No. 16 of 2011 on Legal Aid establishes legal assistance as a right for underprivileged citizens (Mandjo & Sarson, 2021). These legal instruments position the state as a primary actor responsible for ensuring equitable access to legal services. Nevertheless, empirical evidence reveals a significant gap between legal norms and their implementation. Structural barriers such as the uneven distribution of legal professionals, bureaucratic complexity, and limited outreach in rural areas continue to impede effective access to justice (Sumarsih, 2022).

These limitations highlight the need to reconsider state-centric approaches to legal aid and to explore alternative models that are more responsive to local contexts. One such model is the use of paralegals as community-based legal actors. In Indonesia, paralegals are formally recognized under regulatory frameworks such as the Minister of Law and Human Rights Regulation No. 3 of 2021 (Mu'ammar & Diamantina, 2025), which defines their role in providing non-litigation legal services, including legal education, consultation, mediation, and community assistance (Indrawan et al., 2025).

Paralegals occupy a unique position within the legal ecosystem. Unlike professional lawyers, who are often concentrated in urban centers and operate within formal legal institutions, paralegals are embedded within communities (Butar & Simamora, 2025). Their proximity to local populations allows them to understand the socio-cultural dynamics that shape legal disputes and to provide more accessible and context-sensitive legal assistance. In rural areas, where formal legal infrastructure is limited, paralegals often serve as the first point of contact for individuals seeking legal support. This makes them not merely intermediaries but active agents in expanding access to justice.

The role of paralegals can be more adequately understood through the lens of legal empowerment. Legal empowerment shifts the focus of legal aid from a top-down, charity-based model to a bottom-up, participatory approach that enables individuals and communities to understand, use, and shape the law (Joshi, 2017). Within this framework, legal assistance is not merely about resolving individual cases but about building the capacity of communities to assert their rights and engage with legal institutions. Paralegals play a crucial role in this process by enhancing legal literacy, facilitating dispute resolution, and fostering legal consciousness among marginalized populations.

Despite its growing relevance, much of the literature on access to justice and legal empowerment remains rooted in Western legal paradigms, with limited engagement with non-Western normative frameworks. This represents a significant gap, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts such as Indonesia, where legal practices are influenced not only by state law but also by religious and cultural values. In such contexts, a comprehensive understanding of justice requires the integration of Islamic legal philosophy, particularly the concept of Maqasid al-Shariah.

Maqasid al-Shariah refers to the higher objectives of Islamic law aimed at promoting human welfare and preventing harm. Classical scholars such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Al-Shatibi conceptualized these objectives in terms of the protection of essential human interests, including life, intellect, property, lineage, and religion (al-Ghazali, 2020; Al-Syathibi, 2004). In contemporary scholarship, Jasser Auda has further developed this framework through a systems approach that emphasizes flexibility, contextuality, and multidimensionality (Auda, 2025). This approach enables Maqasid al-Shariah to be applied in modern socio-legal contexts, including issues of access to justice and legal empowerment.

Integrating Maqasid al-Shariah into the analysis of legal aid practices provides a normative framework that complements existing socio-legal theories. While access to justice focuses on procedural fairness and institutional accessibility, Maqasid al-Shariah emphasizes substantive justice and human well-being. This combination allows for a more holistic understanding of justice, particularly in addressing the needs of marginalized communities. Legal interventions that protect individuals from economic exploitation, domestic violence, and social marginalization can thus be understood as efforts to realize the objectives of Shariah, particularly the protection of life (hifz al-nafs) and property (hifz al-mal) (Ahyani & Figueiredo, 2024; Khadem, 2024).

This study is situated at the intersection of these theoretical frameworks. It examines the role of paralegals as agents of legal empowerment in rural Indonesia, with a particular focus on how their practices contribute to expanding access to justice and realizing the objectives of Maqasid al-Shariah. The empirical focus of the study is Tlogosari Subdistrict in Bondowoso Regency, a semi-rural area characterized by limited access to formal legal institutions, low levels of legal literacy, and strong socio-cultural ties. Field data indicate that paralegals in this region have been actively involved in addressing a wide range of legal issues, including family disputes, economic conflicts, and cases of domestic violence, primarily through non-litigation mechanisms.

These findings demonstrate that paralegals play a critical role in bridging the gap between marginalized communities and the formal legal system. Beyond facilitating access to legal services, they contribute to reducing social conflict, enhancing legal awareness, and fostering community capacity to resolve disputes independently. In Tlogosari, such practices indicate not only functional support but also the emergence of alternative, community-based justice mechanisms rooted in local socio-cultural contexts.

However, despite these contributions, existing scholarship remains fragmented. Studies on access to justice and legal empowerment—largely influenced by scholars such as Mauro Cappelletti—primarily emphasize procedural access and institutional reforms, often within state-centered frameworks. Conversely, Islamic legal scholarship, including maqasid-oriented approaches as developed by Jasser Auda, tends to focus on normative and philosophical dimensions without sufficient empirical grounding in community-based legal practices. As a result, there is a critical gap: the absence of an integrated analytical framework that empirically connects legal empowerment, access to justice, and Maqasid al-Shariah in grassroots contexts.

This study addresses this gap by advancing an interdisciplinary and empirically grounded approach to understanding paralegals as agents of legal empowerment. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do paralegals enhance access to legal aid for underprivileged

communities in rural Indonesia from an access to justice perspective? (2) What strategies do they employ in delivering community-based legal assistance? and (3) How are maqasid values reflected and operationalized in their practices?

By addressing these questions, this study makes two key contributions. Empirically, it provides a grounded analysis of paralegal practices in a rural setting, highlighting their roles, strategies, and socio-legal impacts. Theoretically, it introduces the concept of Islamic Social Justice as a novel framework that integrates access to justice, legal empowerment, and maqasid-based ethical principles into a coherent, context-sensitive model. This framework offers a critical advancement beyond procedural and state-centric paradigms by demonstrating how community-based legal actors can serve as transformative agents in realizing inclusive, substantive, and culturally embedded justice.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an empirical case study approach to explore the role of paralegals in enhancing access to justice for underprivileged communities in rural Indonesia. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly those related to human experiences, interactions, and meaning-making processes within specific contexts (Creswell, 2013). The empirical case study design further allows the researcher to examine the dynamics of paralegal practices in a real-life setting, capturing the complexity of socio-legal interactions that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative methods alone (Yin, 2011). By focusing on a specific locality, this approach facilitates a holistic analysis of how legal empowerment operates at the grassroots level.

This study was conducted in Tlogosari Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency, East Java, Indonesia, a semi-rural area characterized by limited access to formal legal institutions, relatively low levels of legal literacy, and strong socio-cultural cohesion. These conditions render Tlogosari a contextually significant site for examining how paralegals function as intermediaries in settings where access to formal justice mechanisms is structurally constrained. This study prioritizes contextual depth and analytical transferability rather than statistical generalization.

Within this setting, paralegals operate under the coordination of Lembaga Konsultasi Bantuan Hukum (LKBH) Abu Zairi, a local legal aid institution responsible for organizing and supervising community-based legal assistance. Their activities include legal education, consultation, mediation, and dispute resolution, particularly in cases related to family law, economic conflicts, and domestic violence.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and experiential relevance. In total, this study involved 15 participants, consisting of: (1) paralegals affiliated with LKBH Abu Zairi (n = 6), (2) members of underprivileged communities who have received legal assistance (n = 6), and (3) legal practitioners or institutional representatives (n = 3). Data collection was conducted until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring sufficient depth and variation of perspectives. This multi-actor approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the roles, strategies, and impacts of paralegals in advancing community-based legal empowerment. (Patton, 2002).

Data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in providing or receiving legal assistance. A semi-structured interview format was employed to maintain flexibility while ensuring that essential themes related to access to justice, legal empowerment, and the application of Maqasid al-Shariah were adequately addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In addition to interviews, participant observation was carried out to capture the actual practices of paralegals within the community, particularly in mediation processes and legal assistance activities. This method provides valuable contextual insights that may

not be fully revealed through verbal accounts alone, allowing the researcher to observe how legal principles are translated into practice (Spradley, 1980). Document analysis was also utilized to examine relevant materials, including legal regulations, organizational records, and case documentation, which help situate the empirical findings within broader institutional and legal frameworks.

The data collected were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data condensation was carried out by selecting and organizing relevant information from interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents into thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These themes include the roles of paralegals, strategies of legal assistance, and the manifestation of Maqasid al-Shariah values in practice. The condensed data were then presented in a structured form to facilitate interpretation, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge. Finally, conclusions were drawn through an iterative process of interpretation and verification, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data and supported by consistent evidence.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed several validation strategies, including triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data obtained from different sources and methods to ensure consistency and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement in the field enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the research context and to build trust with participants, which is essential for obtaining reliable data. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings and to minimize potential bias.

The analysis of this study is guided by an interdisciplinary framework that integrates access to justice, legal empowerment, and Maqasid al-Shariah. The access to justice framework is used to assess how paralegal practices contribute to improving the availability, accessibility, affordability, and effectiveness of legal services. The concept of legal empowerment is employed to examine how these practices enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to understand and utilize the law. Meanwhile, Maqasid al-Shariah serves as a normative framework to evaluate whether these practices contribute to the protection of fundamental human interests, particularly the protection of life and property. By integrating these perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of paralegals not only as facilitators of legal access but also as agents of transformative justice in rural communities.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Paralegals as Agents of Legal Empowerment in Rural Communities

The findings of this study reveal that paralegals in Tlogosari Subdistrict occupy a pivotal and transformative position within the local legal landscape, functioning not merely as auxiliary legal actors but as central agents of legal empowerment (Cheema & Riaz, 2022). Their presence reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of how access to justice is operationalized in rural contexts, where formal legal institutions often fail to reach marginalized populations effectively (Cheema & Riaz, 2022). In Tlogosari, structural constraints—including economic hardship, limited legal literacy, and restricted geographical access to courts and professional legal services—create a persistent disjunction between the formal promise of legal equality and its substantive realization.

Within this structural gap, paralegals affiliated with the Lembaga Konsultasi Bantuan Hukum (LKBH) Abu Zairi emerge as grassroots actors who actively bridge the distance between law and society. Their role is not confined to delivering legal services but extends to reshaping the relationship between community members and the legal system itself. This shift is best understood through the framework of legal empowerment, which emphasizes the transformation of individuals from passive

recipients of legal aid into active agents capable of understanding, utilizing, and influencing legal processes (Swenson, 2018). In this regard, paralegals in Tlogosari do not simply "assist" the poor; they enable them to engage with the law in ways that were previously inaccessible.

Empirical findings indicate that this empowerment process is enacted through a set of interconnected roles that combine legal knowledge with social engagement. As legal educators, paralegals play a crucial role in addressing the low level of legal literacy that characterizes many rural communities (Mattei, 1997). Rather than relying on formal or abstract legal instruction, they adopt context-sensitive approaches that translate legal concepts into everyday language and lived experiences (Hamed & Alqurashi, 2025). This method allows community members to recognize legal dimensions in issues that were previously perceived as purely social or personal, such as marital disputes or economic exploitation. In doing so, paralegals contribute to the formation of legal consciousness, which is widely recognized as a foundational element of legal empowerment.

The mediating role of paralegals highlights their transformative function in shaping access to justice at the grassroots level. Empirical findings show that most disputes in Tlogosari—particularly those related to family law, domestic violence, and economic conflicts such as predatory lending—are primarily resolved through community-based mediation facilitated by paralegals. This pattern indicates that non-litigation mechanisms have become the dominant pathway for resolving disputes, reflecting both structural limitations of formal legal systems and local preferences for maintaining social harmony (Kusumawati, 2016a).

For underprivileged communities, formal litigation is often perceived as costly, complex, and socially disruptive. In contrast, mediation offers a more accessible and culturally acceptable alternative. As one paralegal explained, *"people here prefer solutions that maintain relationships, not just legal decisions"* (Interview, Paralegal, Tlogosari). This illustrates that justice in the local context is not solely procedural but also relational, emphasizing consensus and social stability.

Importantly, paralegals do not act merely as neutral mediators but adopt an advocacy-oriented approach, particularly in cases involving vulnerable individuals. In instances of domestic violence, for example, they ensure that victims are protected and able to voice their concerns. One participant noted, *"the paralegal helped me understand my rights and made me feel safe during the process"* (Interview, Community Member). Similarly, in economic disputes, paralegals assist individuals in renegotiating unfair agreements, enabling them to challenge exploitative practices (Hadri, 2025).

Beyond mediation, paralegals also function as facilitators who bridge the gap between communities and formal legal institutions. By explaining procedures and guiding individuals through legal processes, they reduce both informational and psychological barriers. As one informant stated, *"with their guidance, going to court is no longer as intimidating as before"* (Interview, Legal Aid Recipient).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that paralegals are not peripheral actors but central agents of legal empowerment. Their ability to integrate legal knowledge with social and cultural understanding enables them to create more accessible, responsive, and meaningful pathways to justice in rural communities.

3.2. Strategies of Community-Based Legal Assistance: Bridging Access to Justice

The findings of this study demonstrate that the effectiveness of paralegals in Tlogosari Subdistrict is fundamentally shaped by the strategies they employ in delivering legal assistance. These strategies are not merely technical choices but represent a conscious adaptation to structural constraints faced by underprivileged communities, including economic limitations, low legal literacy, and restricted access to formal legal institutions (Maate, 2018). In this context, paralegals operate as strategic agents who translate the abstract ideals of access to justice into practical, context-sensitive interventions.

One of the most prominent strategies identified in this study is the prioritization of non-litigation mechanisms, particularly mediation and community-based dispute resolution. Empirical findings show that most cases in Tlogosari—such as marital property disputes (gono-gini), post-divorce economic neglect, domestic violence, and debt-related conflicts—are resolved through mediation facilitated by paralegals. This reflects a pragmatic response to the high costs, procedural complexity, and social risks associated with formal litigation (Erwira, 2016).

At the same time, this approach aligns with local socio-cultural values that emphasize harmony, consensus, and the preservation of social relationships. As community members, paralegals possess the cultural competence to facilitate dialogue that is both legally informed and socially acceptable. Mediation thus functions not only as a cost-effective mechanism but also as a culturally legitimate form of dispute resolution, indicating that access to justice in rural contexts is shaped by both institutional and socio-cultural dimensions (Darlen, 2019).

Beyond mediation, paralegals employ participatory legal education as a proactive strategy to enhance legal awareness and prevent disputes. Through informal discussions, case-based explanations, and community engagement, they disseminate legal knowledge in accessible ways. This strategy aligns with the concept of legal empowerment, which emphasizes capacity building as a central objective of legal assistance (Derevyanko et al., 2023). By improving legal literacy, paralegals enable individuals to recognize legal issues early and take appropriate action, thereby reducing the likelihood of disputes escalating into more complex conflicts.

Another critical strategy identified in this study is the facilitation of access to formal legal institutions. While paralegals prioritize non-litigation mechanisms, they recognize that certain cases require formal legal intervention. In such situations, they assist community members in navigating the legal system by providing information, preparing documents, and referring cases to legal aid organizations or professional advocates (Asghar et al., 2025; Kusumawati, 2016b). This facilitative role is essential in overcoming barriers such as lack of information, bureaucratic complexity, and psychological intimidation associated with formal legal processes.

These strategies can be systematically analyzed through the four key dimensions of access to justice: availability, accessibility, affordability, and effectiveness (Cappelletti et al., 1982). The table below synthesizes how paralegal strategies in Tlogosari contribute to each of these dimensions:

Table 1 Paralegal Strategies and Access to Justice Dimensions

Strategy	Description (Empirical Findings)	Access to Justice Dimension	Analytical Implication
Community-based mediation	Resolving disputes (family, debt, domestic violence) through non-litigation mechanisms	Affordability, Effectiveness	Reduces cost and produces socially sustainable outcomes
Participatory legal education	Informal legal awareness through discussions and case-based explanations	Accessibility, Availability	Enhances legal literacy and early problem identification
Facilitation to formal systems	Assisting referrals, documentation, and legal navigation	Accessibility, Availability	Bridges gap between community and formal institutions
Cultural-contextual adaptation	Aligning dispute resolution with local norms (musyawarah, consensus)	Effectiveness	Ensures legitimacy and acceptance of legal outcomes

The table illustrates that paralegal strategies in Tlogosari are not isolated actions but interconnected mechanisms that collectively enhance multiple dimensions of access to justice. For example, mediation not only reduces financial barriers (affordability) but also produces outcomes that are more sustainable (effectiveness). Similarly, legal education improves accessibility by making legal knowledge understandable while simultaneously increasing the availability of legal awareness within the community.

Importantly, the findings suggest that these strategies are applied flexibly rather than rigidly. Paralegals adapt their approaches based on the nature of each case, the needs of the individuals involved, and the broader social context. This flexibility reflects an understanding of law as a dynamic and context-dependent system, rather than a fixed set of rules to be applied uniformly (M. J. Ali, 2024). Such an approach is particularly important in rural settings, where standardized legal procedures may not adequately address the complexity of local realities.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the strategies employed by paralegals in Tlogosari represent a shift toward a more decentralized and community-oriented model of access to justice. Rather than relying solely on formal legal institutions, this model recognizes the importance of grassroots actors in expanding legal access (Auda, 2008). It also highlights the limitations of state-centric approaches, which often fail to reach marginalized populations effectively.

Furthermore, the integration of these strategies with local socio-cultural values enhances their legitimacy and effectiveness. By aligning legal interventions with community norms, paralegals are able to create solutions that are not only legally valid but also socially accepted. This integration is particularly significant in contexts where trust in formal legal institutions may be limited.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that the success of paralegals in improving access to justice in Tlogosari is largely determined by the strategic approaches they employ. Through a combination of mediation, participatory education, and facilitative support, paralegals are able to overcome structural barriers and create more accessible, affordable, and effective pathways to justice. These strategies provide a compelling example of how community-based legal assistance can operationalize the principles of access to justice in ways that are both practical and transformative.

3.3. Integrating Maqasid al-Shariah in Legal Empowerment: Towards Islamic Social Justice

The findings of this study indicate that the practices of paralegals in Tlogosari Subdistrict cannot be adequately explained solely through procedural or institutional frameworks such as access to justice and legal empowerment. While these frameworks are useful in understanding how legal services become more available, accessible, affordable, and effective, they do not fully capture the normative dimension that underlies legal action in a Muslim-majority rural context. To address this limitation, this study integrates the framework of Maqasid al-Shariah, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of justice by emphasizing the protection of fundamental human interests and the realization of collective welfare (Arifin, 2024).

Classical Islamic legal scholarship conceptualizes Maqasid al-Shariah as the higher objectives of law aimed at preserving essential human values. Scholars such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Al-Shatibi articulate these objectives through the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Al-Syathibi, 2004). In contemporary discourse, Jasser Auda expands this framework by proposing a systems-based approach that emphasizes contextuality, multidimensionality, and the dynamic nature of legal interpretation (Auda, 2008). Within this expanded understanding, law is not merely a set of rigid rules but a flexible system oriented toward achieving justice and human well-being.

In the empirical context of Tlogosari, the practices of paralegals reflect a strong alignment with these maqasid principles, even though such alignment is not always articulated explicitly in doctrinal terms. Their interventions demonstrate that legal assistance at the community level is not only about

resolving disputes but also about safeguarding essential human interests that are deeply embedded in both social and religious values. This is particularly evident in the handling of cases related to domestic violence and economic exploitation, which represent two of the most significant legal issues identified in this study (Agusra et al., 2025; Anisah et al., 2025).

In cases of domestic violence, paralegals play an active role in protecting victims, facilitating mediation, and ensuring that the resolution process prioritizes safety, dignity, and well-being. These actions correspond directly to the principle of hifz al-nafs (protection of life), which is one of the core objectives of Maqasid al-Shariah. The emphasis placed by paralegals on preventing physical harm and reducing the risk of recurring violence illustrates a shift from merely resolving disputes to actively safeguarding human life (Fadli & Helmi, 2024). In this sense, legal intervention becomes an instrument of protection rather than a neutral procedural mechanism. This approach also reflects a broader understanding of justice that goes beyond formal legality to include ethical responsibility and social care.

Similarly, in cases involving economic disputes, particularly those related to predatory lending practices, paralegals assist community members in understanding the legal implications of their financial obligations and in negotiating more equitable arrangements. These interventions align with the principle of hifz al-mal (protection of property), which seeks to prevent unjust enrichment and economic exploitation (Zailani & Zakaria, 2023). By addressing imbalances in economic power and promoting fairness in financial transactions, paralegals contribute to the realization of distributive justice at the community level. This is especially important in rural contexts where individuals are often vulnerable to exploitative practices due to limited access to financial literacy and legal resources (Zailani et al., 2022).

Beyond these specific cases, the educational role of paralegals also reflects the principle of hifz al-'aql (protection of intellect), as their efforts to increase legal awareness contribute to the development of critical thinking and informed decision-making among community members. Through participatory legal education, individuals are not only equipped with knowledge about their rights but are also encouraged to engage more actively in resolving their own legal issues (Kamali, 1999). This process enhances their autonomy and reduces dependency on external actors, thereby reinforcing the broader goals of legal empowerment.

The integration of these maqasid principles into paralegal practices occurs in an implicit and experiential manner. Paralegals do not necessarily frame their actions using formal Islamic legal terminology; rather, they internalize values of justice, fairness, and protection that are deeply rooted in the socio-religious context of the community (D. Z. Ali et al., 2024). This implicit integration is significant because it enhances the legitimacy of their interventions. Community members are more likely to accept and trust legal processes that resonate with their moral and cultural values, as opposed to those that are perceived as externally imposed or detached from local realities.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding challenges the limitations of dominant access to justice frameworks, which tend to emphasize procedural equality without sufficiently addressing substantive outcomes. While the removal of barriers to legal access is undoubtedly important, it does not guarantee that the outcomes of legal processes will be just or beneficial for those involved (al-Hudawi et al., 2024). By incorporating Maqasid al-Shariah, this study shifts the focus from access alone to the quality and impact of legal outcomes. Justice, in this sense, is evaluated not only by whether individuals can access legal institutions, but by whether those institutions and processes effectively protect their fundamental interests (Awang et al., 2025).

The convergence of access to justice, legal empowerment, and Maqasid al-Shariah in the practices of paralegals in Tlogosari gives rise to what can be conceptualized as Islamic Social Justice. This concept represents a synthesis of procedural accessibility, participatory empowerment, and normative

orientation toward human welfare. It reflects a model of justice that is grounded in local realities while remaining connected to broader ethical principles. Unlike conventional legal frameworks that prioritize formal procedures, Islamic Social Justice emphasizes the integration of law, morality, and community engagement (Bano, 2007).

This model is particularly relevant in rural settings, where formal legal systems often face limitations in terms of accessibility and cultural resonance. By embedding legal practices within the social and ethical fabric of the community, paralegals are able to create a form of justice that is both meaningful and sustainable (Hidayati et al., 2021). Their work demonstrates that justice does not have to be confined to courtrooms or formal institutions but can be realized through community-based processes that prioritize dialogue, fairness, and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that the integration of Maqasid al-Shariah into legal empowerment practices contributes to a form of legal pluralism in which multiple normative systems coexist and interact. In Tlogosari, state law, community norms, and Islamic ethical values are not mutually exclusive but are integrated in ways that enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of legal interventions. This pluralistic approach allows for more flexible and context-sensitive responses to complex social issues, particularly those that cannot be adequately addressed through a single legal framework.

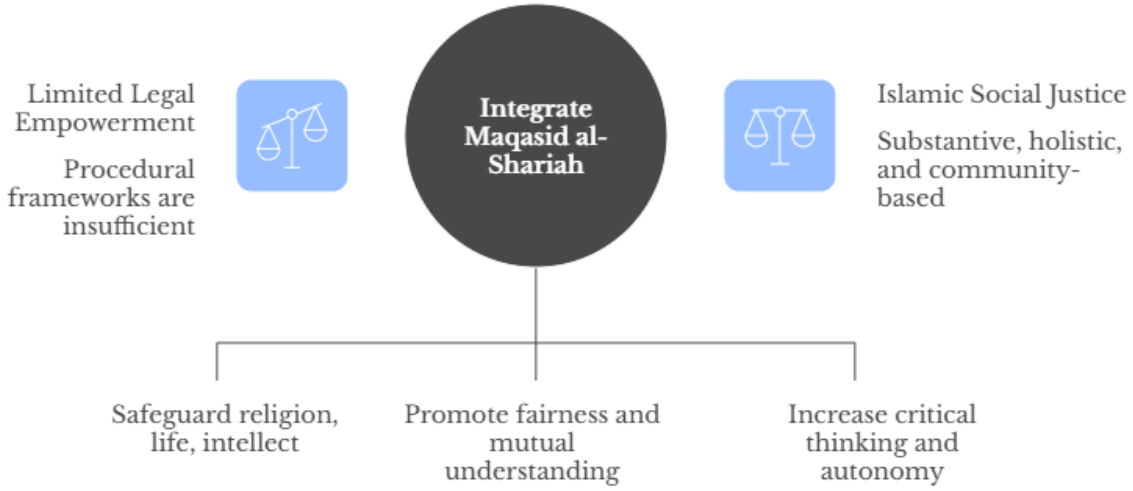


Figure 1 Integrating Maqasid al-Shariah for Islamic Social Justice

In conclusion, the integration of Maqasid al-Shariah into the practices of paralegals in Tlogosari provides a robust normative foundation for rethinking access to justice. By aligning legal interventions with the protection of fundamental human interests, paralegals contribute to a more substantive and holistic conception of justice. The concept of Islamic Social Justice that emerges from this study offers a significant theoretical contribution, demonstrating how community-based legal actors can bridge the gap between formal legal systems and ethical frameworks to create more inclusive and transformative models of justice in rural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how paralegals function as agents of legal empowerment in rural Indonesia by bridging the gap between access to justice and the normative framework of Maqasid al-Shariah. Drawing on empirical data from Tlogosari Subdistrict, Bondowoso Regency, the findings demonstrate that paralegals play a transformative role that extends far beyond conventional legal aid practices. Rather than merely assisting individuals in navigating legal procedures, paralegals actively reshape how justice is accessed, understood, and experienced at the grassroots level.

First, this study confirms that paralegals operate as multidimensional actors who combine roles as legal educators, mediators, and facilitators of legal access. Their work contributes to the development of legal awareness among underprivileged communities, enabling individuals to recognize their rights and engage more actively with legal processes. In a context characterized by limited legal literacy and restricted access to formal institutions, this educational function is particularly significant. It marks a shift from a dependency-based model of legal aid toward a participatory model of legal empowerment, in which communities are no longer passive recipients but active agents of justice.

Second, the strategies employed by paralegals in Tlogosari reveal a pragmatic and context-sensitive approach to legal assistance. By prioritizing non-litigation mechanisms such as mediation and community-based dispute resolution, paralegals are able to provide legal services that are more accessible, affordable, and socially acceptable. These strategies effectively address key dimensions of access to justice, including availability, accessibility, affordability, and effectiveness. At the same time, the use of participatory legal education and facilitative support further strengthens community capacity and reduces structural barriers to legal access. This demonstrates that access to justice in rural contexts cannot rely solely on formal legal institutions but must also incorporate community-based approaches that are responsive to local realities.

Third, and most importantly, this study highlights the significance of integrating Maqasid al-Shariah into the analysis of legal empowerment. The findings show that paralegal practices in Tlogosari implicitly reflect the core objectives of Islamic law, particularly in protecting life (hifz al-nafs), property (hifz al-mal), and intellect (hifz al-'aql). Interventions in cases of domestic violence and economic exploitation illustrate how legal assistance can function as a means of safeguarding fundamental human interests. This integration provides a normative foundation that complements existing socio-legal frameworks, shifting the focus from procedural access to substantive justice.

Building on these findings, this study proposes the concept of Islamic Social Justice as a theoretical contribution to the literature on access to justice and legal empowerment. This concept captures the convergence of three key elements: procedural accessibility, participatory empowerment, and normative orientation toward human welfare. Islamic Social Justice represents a model of justice that is not only inclusive and community-based but also ethically grounded in the principles of Maqasid al-Shariah. It challenges the dominance of state-centric and litigation-oriented approaches by demonstrating the potential of grassroots legal actors in realizing meaningful justice.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the expansion of access to justice discourse by incorporating Islamic legal philosophy into socio-legal analysis. It demonstrates that the integration of Maqasid al-Shariah can enrich existing frameworks by providing a more holistic understanding of justice that encompasses both procedural and substantive dimensions. At the same time, it advances the concept of legal empowerment by showing how it can be operationalized in culturally and religiously grounded contexts.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have important implications for the development of legal aid systems in rural and marginalized areas. Strengthening the role of paralegals through training, institutional support, and policy recognition can significantly enhance access to justice for underprivileged communities. In particular, the integration of normative frameworks such as Maqasid al-Shariah into legal aid practices can increase their legitimacy and effectiveness, especially in Muslim-majority contexts.

However, this study also acknowledges certain limitations. As a qualitative case study focused on a specific locality, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other contexts with different socio-cultural characteristics. Future research could expand this analysis by comparing paralegal practices across different regions or by examining the role of other community-based legal actors in diverse settings.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that paralegals in rural Indonesia play a crucial role in bridging the gap between law and society. Through their multidimensional roles, adaptive strategies, and implicit integration of Maqasid al-Shariah, they contribute to the realization of a more inclusive, participatory, and ethically grounded model of justice. The concept of Islamic Social Justice emerging from this study offers a promising framework for rethinking access to justice in ways that are both context-sensitive and normatively robust.

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