



Reach Alliance

A Blueprint for Change: Strengthening Community-Based Legal Empowerment to Improve Justice Outcomes for Women

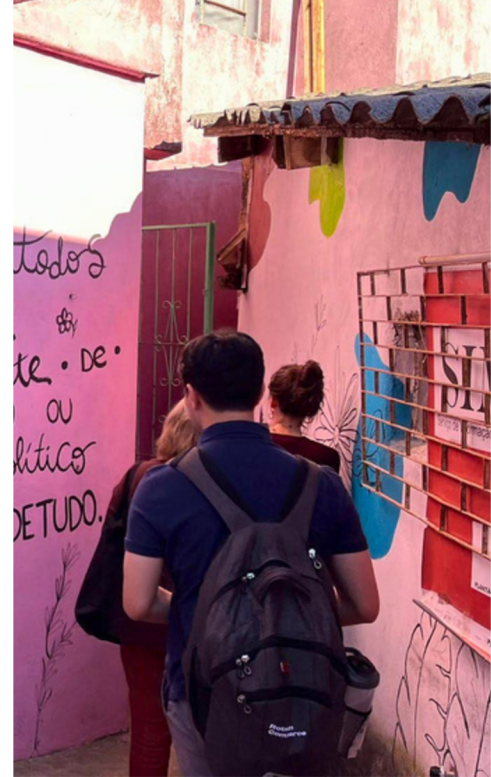
Luke Lee, Samantha Misner, Thuraya Abdul Hamid



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

Executive Summary

Women in Brazil, particularly Black women and women living in low-income and underserved communities, continue to face significant barriers to accessing justice. While national legislation such as the Maria da Penha Law has strengthened formal protections, uneven enforcement, low institutional trust, and social and economic marginalization prevent many survivors from reaching safety and receiving the support they require. As a result, informal networks and community-based actors often play a larger role in facilitating access to information, rights, and enforcement mechanisms than formal state systems.



The Promotoras Legais Populares (PLP) model addresses these challenges by equipping women with legal knowledge and advocacy tools to support themselves and other women within their communities. PLPs work from within their communities to enable survivors to understand and claim their rights, to hold institutions accountable for enforcing legal protections, and to reshape how state services respond to violence on the ground.

For over three decades, this approach has expanded nationally in Brazil and demonstrated its capacity to adapt across diverse contexts, including in areas affected by criminal violence, shifting political environments, and public emergencies. The PLP model's durability stems from its decentralized governance, volunteer foundation, strong feminist social-movement roots, and ability to work strategically with institutions while maintaining independence.

This brief outlines key insights and recommendations for strengthening and expanding community-based legal empowerment to improve justice outcomes for women in hard-to-reach populations. The solutions proposed offer governments, civil-society organizations, and service providers strategies for implementing reforms that endure political changes and remain responsive to community needs.





Mapping of Policy Stakeholders

Improving access to justice requires coordinated action from a broad landscape of stakeholders. Survivors themselves are central actors, as their lived realities and trust relationships determine whether justice mechanisms are accessible in practice. PLPs and feminist civil-society organizations play a foundational role as the primary implementers and guardians of the model, responsible for training, mentorship, and collective action. Local and national government agencies, including justice, security, social-assistance, and public health institutions, remain essential partners in enforcing rights and providing services that PLPs help women navigate. These actors benefit directly when partnerships with community paralegals improve case detection, referral pathways, and survivor confidence in institutions.

International and domestic donors, research organizations, and global justice-reform actors are also critical in facilitating long-term sustainability, particularly through investments in training infrastructure and knowledge exchange. Certain stakeholders, such as organized criminal groups, abusive partners, and hostile state actors, may resist accountability-oriented work and therefore must be considered in risk-mitigation planning.

The PLP model is relevant to stakeholders seeking reforms that can outlast political shifts, maintain institutional accountability, and strengthen protection systems in communities where state legitimacy is limited. Findings from a longer case study are being made accessible through plain-language publication, Portuguese translation, and upcoming dissemination workshops plain-language publication, Portuguese translation, and dissemination workshops to ensure that contributors and community-based practitioners can engage with and apply the insights generated.

Solutions

The recommended solutions focus on reinforcing what makes the PLP model effective: community autonomy, embeddedness in movements for gender and racial justice, and flexible relationships with formal systems. Four core recommendations are proposed:

- First, strengthening decentralized PLP networks is essential to maintain a resilient foundation for legal empowerment. These networks sustain training, facilitate community-driven adaptations, and ensure continuity despite changes in institutional partnerships or political conditions.
- Second, expanding training and knowledge-sharing mechanisms will support the ongoing diffusion of the model. Peer mentorship, updated curricula, and cross-regional collaboration can help PLPs respond to new forms of violence and evolving local contexts.
- Third, developing safety and protection strategies is critical in environments characterized by high levels of interpersonal violence or state coercion. PLPs may be visible and public in some communities, while discretion and protective structures are required in others.
- Fourth, fostering and maintaining strategic collaboration with state agencies and institutions providing public services can improve enforcement of rights and expand survivor access to protections. However, such collaboration must avoid over-institutionalization or over dependence on individual officials whose support may not be stable over time. Maintaining civil-society leadership is key to the PLP program's ability to continue operating regardless of political shifts.

Remaining implementation challenges include the absence of standardized monitoring and evaluation tools that reflect survivor-defined outcomes, sustainability concerns associated with volunteer work, and varying security conditions that influence how openly PLPs may operate.



Recommendations

Deep Dive

Strengthening PLP networks should be prioritized as the foundation for sustainable access-to-justice strategies. The model aligns well with contexts where social movements are active and community leadership structures already exist. It has proven operationally feasible through volunteer-based mentorship and regionally adapted implementation. Financial resources are most needed for core operational support to the organizations anchoring the model. Socially, investment in network cohesion directly benefits survivors and builds durable community capacity to identify rights violations and seek remedies.



Expanding training and coordination pipelines is a logical next step to ensure that PLPs remain responsive as contexts change. This recommendation supports Brazil's existing legal commitments on gender equity and may be generalizable in other jurisdictions with similar frameworks. Implementation is feasible due to established training processes and movement-based knowledge exchange. Assistance may be needed to sustain training materials, ongoing learning opportunities, and convening spaces. The primary social benefit is the preservation and growth of a trusted frontline workforce that women can safely reach.

Safety and protection measures are critical to safeguarding PLPs and survivors in communities where organized crime, pervasive state violence, or retaliation risks are present. These measures must be tailored to local conditions and co-designed with affected populations. Operational needs include community-specific risk assessments and protective strategies. While the financial burden is relatively low, support must be consistent. Implementing safety measures strengthens the long-term viability of PLP activities and mitigates threats that could otherwise undermine access to justice.

Strategic engagement with state systems can increase the reach and effectiveness of PLPs without compromising movement autonomy. Collaboration should focus on creating pathways into protective services, facilitating referrals, and sharing insights that can inform justice and social-policy design. The model's success demonstrates that governments may strengthen their own legitimacy by recognizing and supporting community-led approaches. However, these partnerships must be structured to avoid overdependence on individual officials or political parties. When executed correctly, collaboration supports survivors' trust in state mechanisms and facilitates more consistent rights enforcement.

Prioritization and Technical Assistance for Implementation

To operationalize these recommendations, several actions should be prioritized. Feminist organizations and civil-society alliances require flexible, multi-year funding to sustain training, coordination, and adaptation activities. Protection strategies must be developed collaboratively with PLPs and community members as part of organizational planning and local decision-making structures. Strengthening PLP presence in additional municipalities and states will require support for training logistics, mentorship, and regional facilitation.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be developed jointly with PLPs, survivors, and researchers to ensure that performance metrics reflect meaningful outcomes (such as improved trust, increased access to protection mechanisms, and reduced exposure to harm), rather than solely institutional benchmarks. Technical assistance is also needed in areas such as security planning, psychosocial support, prevention of burnout, and the use of digital platforms to facilitate communication and rapid coordination across regions.

These investments will support scalable progress toward equitable access to justice while preserving the core movement values that sustain the PLP model.

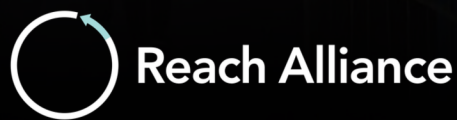


Conclusion

The PLP model demonstrates that improved access to justice depends not only on legal reforms and institutional investments, but also on the empowerment of communities to navigate and influence justice systems. Community paralegals play a unique role in challenging the exclusion faced by women in marginalized areas by building trust, fostering agency, and mobilizing collective responses to rights violations. Strengthening this model will reinforce survivor pathways to safety, support more consistent enforcement of legal protections, and produce justice outcomes that can withstand political instability.

Lessons from the PLP model are relevant beyond Brazil. Specifically, governments, donors, and civil-society actors working in other contexts characterized by gender inequality, low institutional trust, or high levels of violence may draw directly from this case to design effective and durable community-based access-to-justice interventions.





This work builds on the 2024-25 Reach research report, "[Access to Justice for Women in Brazil: The Role of Paralegals](#)," by Thuraya Abdul Hamid, Jude Konyar, Luke Lee, Samantha Misner, Sofia Bordin Rolim, Mariana Mota Prado, and all the impactful partners, community members, and mentors involved in the research.

As part of the "Pathways from Evidence to Action" series, inspired by the African Center for Equitable Development (ACED), the Reach Alliance challenged researchers to identify connections, address gaps, and develop recommendations grounded in their findings. The series comprises thirteen briefing notes developing solutions for urgent climate, public health, and economic challenges and engages practitioners and policymakers in advancing pathways to implementation.

Published by the Reach Alliance | July 2026 | reachalliance.org