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ENHANCING ACCESS TO JUSTICE
OF VULNERABLE GROUPS



COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE SUD SUD

Improving Access to Justice in Moldova

Voices, Barriers, and Solutions: A Citizen-Centered Analysis (2021–2024)

Final Analytical Report

Based on a national survey of 1,713 respondents
Integrated with institutional consultations and focus group findings

Geographic focus: Northern and Southern Moldova, including Bălți, Comrat, and rural districts

Project Title

*“Enhancing Legal Inclusion for Vulnerable Groups in Moldova”
(European Programme for Human Rights and Democracy)*

Prepared by

CISS – Cooperarea Internațională Sud-Sud

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1. Executive summary

This report presents an in-depth analysis of access to justice in Moldova from the perspective of citizens who received legal services between 2021 and 2024, with a particular focus on individuals in vulnerable situations. Built on a combination of quantitative survey data (n=1,713), qualitative focus group inputs, and participatory recommendations, the findings reflect a justice system that is **functionally accessible on paper but inconsistently experienced in practice**—especially by marginalized groups.

The report has been made with the support of the project “**Enhancing Access to Justice for Vulnerable Groups**”, supported by the European Programme for Human Rights and Democracy. It was implemented by **CISS – International South-South Cooperation** in partnership with **Clinica Juridică Bălți**, **Clinica Juridică Comrat**, and a network of paralegals and NGOs across northern and southern Moldova.

Purpose and scope

The core objectives of this study were to: Understand how different groups experience legal services in Moldova; Identify structural barriers and perceptions of justice; Evaluate trust and satisfaction with legal service providers; Generate data-driven, SMART policy recommendations for equitable legal reform.

The analysis integrates diverse variables—gender, age, ethnicity, residence, vulnerability, education level—and assesses both perceived changes in justice access and concrete ratings of legal actors.

Key findings

1. Primary legal aid dominates, yet falls short of full access

80.6% of respondents received only **primary legal aid** (information, guidance, form-filling).

Only **19.4%** accessed **qualified legal representation**, despite widespread legal need in family law, property disputes, and protection claims.

This constitutes a **procedural justice gap**, where people begin legal processes but lack the means to complete them.

2. Trust lies with NGOs, not formal institutions

NGOs were the most trusted legal service providers, with an average rating of **3.75/5**.

Public institutions—judges (3.33), lawyers (3.37), prosecutors (2.99)—scored lower, reflecting gaps in responsiveness, clarity, and empathy.

Citizens described NGOs as **accessible, respectful, and human-centered**, while formal actors were often seen as **remote or bureaucratic**.

3. Vulnerable groups experience justice differently—and more harshly

Single parents rated legal services lowest overall: judges (3.02), prosecutors (2.77), paralegals (2.64).

Roma respondents consistently gave the lowest average scores: e.g., judges (2.78), prosecutors (2.56).

Respondents who self-reported “no vulnerability” rated most services higher, especially judges (3.58) and lawyers (3.40).

This confirms a **systemic equity gap**, where institutional services are less accessible and less satisfactory to those with the greatest legal need.

4. Regional and ethnic disparities affect perception and participation

Urban and rural respondents gave similar ratings on the surface, but **rural communities relied heavily on one or two local actors** and faced logistical and information barriers.

Gagauz and Roma communities reported cultural and linguistic obstacles, while Ukrainians—recently supported through humanitarian efforts—reported the highest trust levels (e.g., NGOs 4.12).

These patterns highlight a **standardization gap**: services are designed uniformly, but populations are not.

5. Access to justice has “remained the same” for most respondents

Focus groups revealed widespread frustration with **lack of institutional progress**.

Respondents noted that while **they may now understand their rights better**, they still **lack trust, affordability, or proximity to act on them**.

Trust improvements were mostly credited to **NGO or paralegal outreach—not justice sector reform**.

6. Legal engagement is cyclical, not constant

Survey response rates peaked in **September and November 2024**, and dropped sharply in August and December.

This trend points to the importance of **timing legal outreach with civic rhythms**, ensuring sustained services even during holidays and institutional slowdowns.

Gap analysis summary

The following were identified as the most pressing gaps:

Gap Type	Indicator	Root Cause
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Procedural Justice	80.6% received only primary legal aid	Underfunded representation, no referral system
Institutional Responsiveness	Low ratings from Roma, single parents	Lack of empathy, cultural bias, inaccessible language
Rural Disparity	Surface rating parity hides lower access	Centralized services, long distances, digital exclusion
Standardization Gap	One-size services for non-uniform populations	Lack of tailored service pathways
Accountability Gap	No feedback/complaint mechanisms	Institutions not monitored for client satisfaction

Strategic recommendations

The report concludes with **12 high-impact, SMART recommendations**:

1. **Expand qualified legal aid access** to 35% of recipients by 2025.
2. **Deploy 7 mobile legal aid units** in rural districts by Q1 2025.
3. **Establish 30 legal kiosks** in local public institutions by end of 2025.
4. **Launch tailored legal pathways** for single parents and the unemployed by Q4 2025.
5. **Translate legal forms and materials** into 5 minority languages by mid-2025.
6. **Recruit 100 culturally competent paralegals and lawyers** by early 2026.
7. **Create a centralized feedback and complaints portal** with a 10,000-user target.
8. **Introduce a 3.5/5 service benchmark** for all public legal providers in the 2026 budget cycle.
9. **Pilot annual justice campaigns** in September and November to match public participation patterns.
10. **Mandate year-end protection coverage** for domestic violence and eviction cases.
11. **Establish a real-time referral system** linking primary to qualified legal aid by 2025.
12. **Institutionalize legal aid bundles** that connect legal help to housing, employment, and social services.

Final reflection: from fragmentation to fairness

This report does not advocate starting over. Moldova’s legal aid infrastructure is built, and its laws are increasingly rights-based. But the experience of justice—who feels protected, who can act on their rights, and who receives a fair outcome—is still deeply shaped by **gender, geography, ethnicity, and vulnerability**.

Justice systems do not transform through availability alone. They transform through **relevance, respect, and responsiveness**.

What Moldova needs now is not more legislation—but **realignment**. The tools are already in place. It is time to direct them **where the gaps are widest and the trust is thinnest**.

The findings from this study clearly show that **formal rights do not equal real access**. Vulnerable groups in Moldova continue to face **intersecting barriers** that isolate them from the protections guaranteed by law. **Civil society organizations, legal clinics, and paralegals** play a vital role in bridging this divide, but they need **stronger institutional support and policy reform** to scale their impact.

This report is not only a snapshot of existing challenges—it is a **blueprint for change**. By integrating legal services with social support, investing in inclusive infrastructure, and fostering meaningful partnerships across sectors, Moldova can move closer to ensuring that **justice is accessible to all, especially those most at risk of being left behind**.

2. Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods research design** combining quantitative survey data, qualitative focus group insights, and stakeholder consultations to assess access to justice in Moldova between 2021 and 2024. The methodology was developed to capture both the **breadth of citizen experience** across demographic groups and the **depth of institutional dynamics** as perceived by frontline legal actors.

Objectives and research questions

The methodological design was structured around three core questions:

1. **What legal services have citizens accessed between 2021 and 2024, and how do they rate those experiences?**
2. **How do access patterns and satisfaction vary across gender, ethnicity, residence, education, and vulnerability status?**
3. **What systemic obstacles do vulnerable groups face in seeking justice, and what practical measures do they propose?**

The objective was not only to evaluate performance, but to **understand how justice is experienced**—and whether its delivery aligns with principles of equity, accessibility, and public trust.

Data collection design

Quantitative component: citizen survey

A structured questionnaire was administered to **1,713 respondents** across Moldova, primarily during the second half of 2024. The tool was distributed both digitally and in person, with the support of **legal aid clinics, paralegals, and NGOs** operating in regions such as Bălți, Sîngerei, Drochia, Comrat, and Găgăuzia.

The survey instrument included: **Demographics**: gender, age, residence (urban/rural), ethnicity, education, vulnerability status; **Legal history**: type of legal assistance received, problems encountered, provider interactions; **Service quality**: Likert-scale ratings (1–5) for lawyers, paralegals, prosecutors, judges, and NGOs; **Perception of change**: subjective evolution in access to justice over time; **Open-ended recommendations** for improving access and service quality

The survey was anonymous and voluntary. Respondents were informed that their input would contribute to a national report on access to justice, intended for both civil society and public institutions.

Qualitative Component: Focus Groups and Consultations

In parallel, a series of **structured focus group discussions and stakeholder consultations** were conducted to gather **contextual, institutional, and community-level perspectives**. These included: **Two focus groups** held in Bălți (April and May 2025) with **24 participants** from NGOs, municipal institutions, paralegals, and university legal clinics; **One hybrid roundtable** (May 13, 2025) with **28 participants**, including 15 paralegals from 7 northern districts; **Two regional focus groups** conducted by Clinica Juridică Comrat, with **12 participants** from Gagauzia, local governance, and the probation service.

Each session followed a common discussion guide, covering: Types of vulnerability and legal exclusion; Definitions of justice from the community's perspective; Common institutional failures and successful interventions; Needs for local collaboration and systemic reform; Recommendations for culturally responsive, integrated legal services;

Participants were encouraged to provide case examples, institutional feedback, and practical suggestions. The sessions were transcribed, translated, and coded thematically.

Sampling strategy

Survey sample

The survey used a **purposive, non-random sampling approach** to ensure adequate representation of: Women and men; Urban and rural residents; Roma, Gagauz, Moldovan,

Ukrainian, and Bulgarian communities; Respondents with legal vulnerability (unemployed, single parents, persons with disabilities);

While the data is not statistically representative at the national level, it is **sufficiently diverse** to reflect differentiated experiences across key demographic and geographic segments.

Focus group participants

Participants were selected based on: Institutional relevance (legal aid, social work, governance, education); Experience working with vulnerable groups; Geographic diversity (north and south Moldova)

This allowed the study to combine **citizen experience with institutional insight**, enriching the data with **real-world knowledge of legal delivery systems**.

Data cleaning and processing

Survey responses were cleaned to: Harmonize dual-language labels (Romanian/Russian); Replace inconsistent categorical entries (e.g., vulnerability statuses, ethnic groups); Convert rating responses to numeric scale (1–5); Standardize open-ended responses into thematic groups.

Outliers and incomplete responses were flagged but retained when partial data offered valuable insights.

All personal data was excluded. The analysis complied with data protection and research ethics protocols as defined by CISS and project partners.

Analytical Techniques

The data was analyzed through a combination of:

Descriptive statistics - Frequency counts and percentages for all categorical variables; Mean satisfaction ratings by provider and demographic group.

Cross-tabulations - Satisfaction ratings disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, vulnerability, and location; Legal aid type (primary/qualified) compared across education and region.

Gap analysis - Structured matrix comparing public expectations vs. received services; Identified performance deficits and systemic shortfalls.

Time series trend - Monthly engagement trends tracked via timestamp data; Used to recommend outreach timing and service readiness.

Thematic coding - Qualitative responses and focus group transcripts were manually coded; Themes included trust, access barriers, language needs, and institutional conduct.

The resulting insights were triangulated—quantitative patterns were explained using qualitative detail, and narrative themes were validated using frequency data.

Limitations

While the methodology is comprehensive, a few limitations are acknowledged: The survey is **not statistically generalizable** to the national population. Vulnerability was **self-reported** and may underrepresent complex, overlapping exclusion. Some columns (e.g., perceived change in justice access) were malformed or inconsistently answered.

Nevertheless, the **breadth of disaggregation, number of responses, and depth of institutional feedback** make the findings **credible, actionable, and reflective of real-world challenges**.

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed of their rights and provided consent. Names and identifying information were anonymized. NGO and institutional partners ensured that respondents participated without coercion or expectation of personal benefit. Focus group facilitators were trained in **trauma-sensitive approaches** to discussing sensitive legal issues.

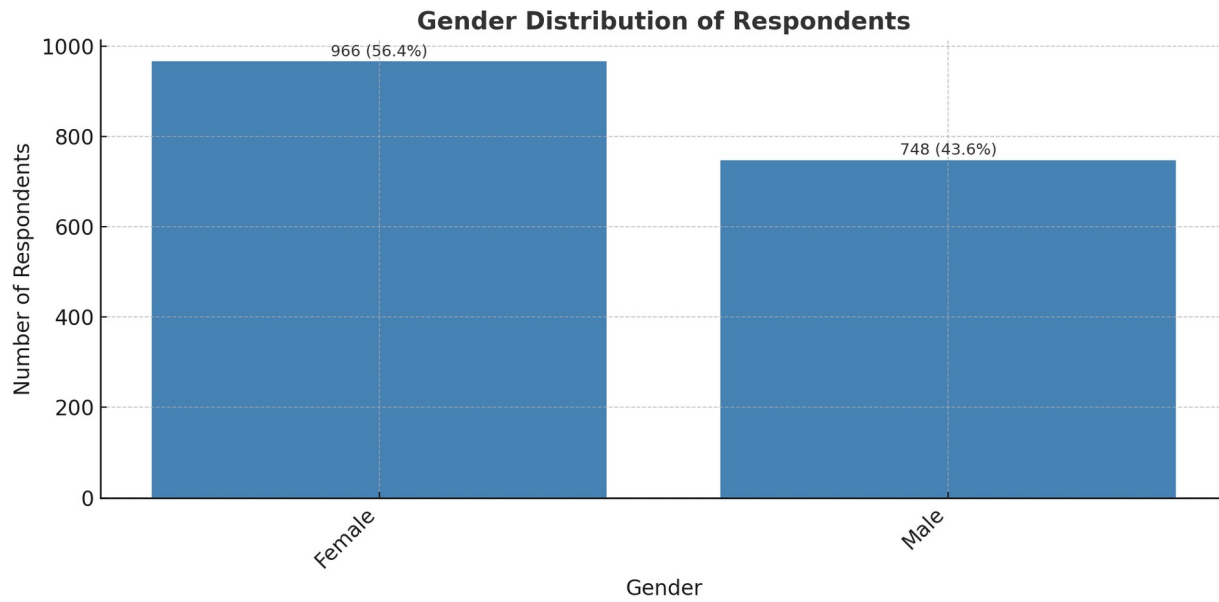
The methodology used in this report ensures that both **statistical patterns and human experiences** inform its findings. The combination of structured data, open-ended feedback, and institutional voice creates a **multi-dimensional picture of access to justice** that reflects both what the system offers—and what it lacks.

3. Profile of Respondents

The respondents of this study represent a diverse cross-section of individuals who accessed legal services in Moldova between 2021 and 2024. The demographic distribution underscores the socio-economic and ethnic diversity of legal aid beneficiaries, as well as the intersectional vulnerabilities that influence access to justice.

Gender distribution

A slight majority of the respondents identified as **female (approximately 56%)**, while **males constituted about 44%** of the surveyed population. This reflects patterns seen in legal aid requests, especially in cases involving domestic violence, child custody, and social protection, where women are often more likely to seek formal support.



The gender distribution of survey respondents reveals key insights into how men and women engage with legal services in Moldova. The data shows a **gendered pattern of access**, reflecting both societal dynamics and service delivery structures.

Key statistical findings

- **Female respondents:** 966 individuals (**56.4%** of the sample)
- **Male respondents:** 748 individuals (**43.6%**)

This gender gap is notable and consistent with broader trends in the provision of legal aid and social services across the region. Women represent the **majority of legal aid users**, a pattern driven by both **legal vulnerability** and **proactive engagement** with institutional support systems.

Women’s legal needs and justice-seeking behavior

The higher participation of women reflects their **greater exposure to legal risks** in areas such as: **Domestic violence and intimate partner abuse; Child custody and alimony disputes; Inheritance rights and property division; Access to social assistance and healthcare entitlements.**

Focus group participants and legal service providers affirmed that **women are often the first to seek institutional help**, particularly when they are primary caregivers or face direct threats to their physical safety and economic stability.

Women from rural areas or ethnic minorities, however, often experience **multiple layers of vulnerability**—compounded by geographic, economic, and cultural barriers. Despite their

greater demand for services, they may still face **significant obstacles in asserting their rights**, especially when legal systems are unresponsive or discriminatory.

Men's Engagement with Legal Services

Although men represent a smaller proportion of users, their legal needs are distinct and no less pressing. Male respondents most commonly seek legal help in cases involving: **Employment disputes; Penal and probation matters; Debt, contracts, and property issues; Discrimination and social reintegration post-incarceration.**

Several focus groups noted that **men may be less likely to seek help early**, either due to stigma, pride, or a perceived lack of institutional trust. This can result in **delayed legal engagement**, often only after a situation has escalated or judicial intervention is mandatory.

There is also evidence that **older men and men from traditional communities** are less inclined to use formal legal channels, relying instead on informal negotiations or community resolution—even in cases where rights are being violated.

The gender distribution of legal aid users highlights the need for a **gender-responsive justice system**. While women are more visible in legal service environments, their vulnerability is often structural and enduring. Men, meanwhile, may be underrepresented not because they face fewer issues, but because **masculine norms and institutional gaps discourage engagement**.

Policy and programmatic recommendations include: Ensuring **safe and confidential environments** for women survivors of violence; Expanding **legal literacy and outreach to men**, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions; Providing **gender-specific legal counseling** and support services; Training legal professionals on **gender bias** and **inclusive communication**.

Gender-responsive justice is not merely about numerical parity in service access—it's about recognizing and addressing the **qualitatively different legal realities** experienced by women and men across Moldova.

Age Groups

Respondents spanned a broad age range, with the majority falling within the **36–45 (34%)** and **46–55 (25%)** year brackets. Younger adults (25–35 years) also formed a significant group (approximately 18%). This age distribution suggests that working-age individuals, particularly those navigating employment disputes, family law issues, or social support systems, are more actively engaging with legal services.

The age profile of respondents provides key insights into which segments of the population are engaging with the justice system and legal aid services. Understanding these age dynamics is vital for tailoring outreach, communication strategies, and service delivery models to meet the distinct legal needs of each demographic.

Key Statistical Findings

The age distribution of survey participants shows that the majority of legal service users fall within **working-age groups**, although older adults are also notably represented. The breakdown is as follows:

36–45 years: 529 respondents (**30.9%** of the sample)

46–55 years: 385 respondents (**22.5%**)

25–35 years: 282 respondents (**16.5%**)

56–65 years: 263 respondents (**15.3%**)

Over 66 years: 134 respondents (**7.8%**)

This distribution clearly indicates that the **core demographic of legal aid recipients is between 25 and 55 years old**, representing over **70%** of the entire survey population. These are individuals most likely to be: Actively employed or seeking employment; Managing family responsibilities such as custody, divorce, or inheritance; Navigating healthcare, housing, or social assistance systems; Involved in disputes related to contracts, labor rights, or administrative processes.

Their legal needs are often urgent and multi-layered, requiring services that are both accessible and responsive to the pressures of mid-life obligations.

Young Adults (25–35 years, 16.5%)

This group tends to engage with legal services around issues such as: Employment rights and contract enforcement; Housing disputes and tenant rights; Access to childcare, parental leave, or education benefits.

They often face **barriers due to inexperience**, lack of familiarity with institutional processes, and digital dependency—preferring online solutions that many legal institutions are not yet equipped to offer.

Middle-Aged Adults (36–55 years, 53.4%)

The largest block of respondents (more than half) are in this middle-adulthood phase. Legal needs for this group often include: Complex family law cases (divorce, child custody, domestic violence); Property disputes or inheritance issues; Discrimination in employment; Difficulties accessing healthcare or pensions.

Many within this cohort are also **caregivers**, managing both child-rearing and elderly support. Their legal interactions are typically more frequent and sustained, meaning that **quality of service and system responsiveness** play a major role in shaping their perception of justice.

Older Adults (56+ years, 23.1%)

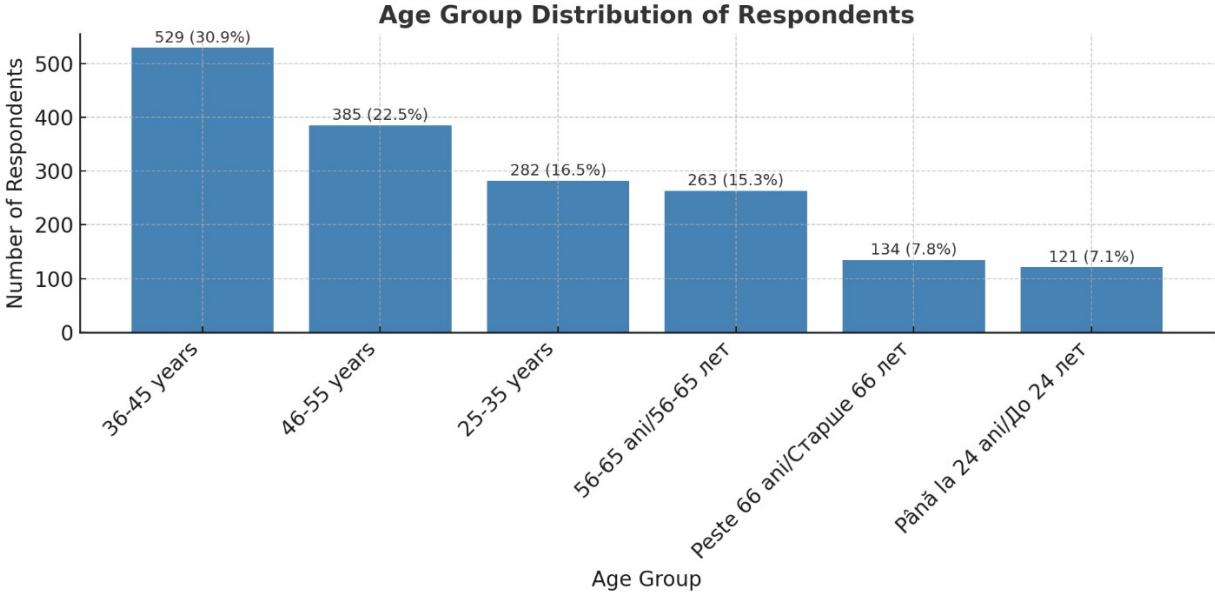
Older respondents—particularly those over 66—represent a **vulnerable and often underserved demographic**. With 263 respondents aged 56–65 (15.3%) and 134 respondents over 66 (7.8%), this group often engages with legal systems due to: Pension and social security disputes; Elder abuse; Property claims and inheritance conflicts; Health-related legal rights.

Many face **mobility challenges, digital exclusion, and isolation**, which hinder access to legal help. In rural areas especially, older adults rely heavily on **paralegals and community legal workers** for both information and representation. Their cases often go underreported due to **stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of trust in institutions**.

The age distribution of legal aid users in Moldova underscores the need for **age-sensitive legal services**. While working-age adults dominate the client base, younger and older groups face distinct barriers that require tailored outreach and accommodations.

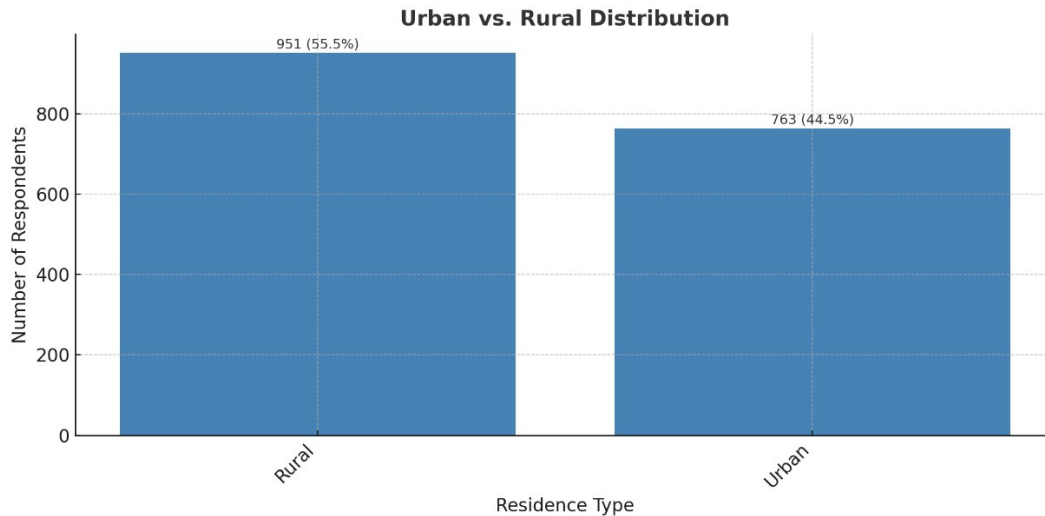
Recommendations emerging from this insight include: **Youth-oriented legal education** to build early legal literacy; **Digital access strategies** for younger users, including mobile-friendly services; **Community-based and mobile services** for older adults, especially in rural areas; **Intergenerational advocacy**, recognizing that legal challenges often affect entire households, not just individuals.

Justice in Moldova must evolve to be **life-stage appropriate**, offering flexible, informed, and inclusive services that adapt to the different needs, capacities, and vulnerabilities across the lifespan.



Geographic Location and Residential Environment

Participants were drawn from both urban centers and rural areas. Notably, respondents from **municipalities like Bălți and districts in the north such as Sîngerei, Drochia, and Rîșcani** were well represented. The dataset indicates a balanced inclusion of both **urban and rural** residents, reflecting efforts by paralegals and NGOs to reach communities outside major city centers.



Understanding where legal service users live—both in terms of geographic region and the nature of their residential environment—is essential to identifying the structural factors that shape their access to justice. The data reveals significant variation in respondent distribution across different localities and between urban and rural areas, highlighting the uneven terrain of legal service delivery in Moldova.

Geographic Location of Respondents

Survey responses were received from a wide array of districts and municipalities, but certain regions were particularly prominent. The five most represented localities in the data were:

Găgăuzia: 652 respondents (**38.0%**)

Municipality of Bălți: 111 respondents (**6.5%**)

Drochia: 101 respondents (**5.9%**)

Rîșcani: 95 respondents (**5.5%**)

Basarabeasca: 80 respondents (**4.7%**)

The heavy concentration of respondents from **Găgăuzia** reflects the targeted inclusion of the southern region in the study design, particularly through partnerships with the **Comrat Legal Clinic** and active outreach by regional paralegals. Găgăuzia's high response rate provides

valuable insights into how language, distance, and autonomy shape justice access in semi-independent regions.

The **municipality of Bălți**, as a key urban center in the north, serves as both a population hub and a service delivery base. Respondents from Bălți described easier access to legal offices, yet still highlighted bureaucratic inefficiencies and difficulties navigating the judicial process without assistance. Despite proximity, barriers persisted due to complexity, intimidation, or financial limitations.

Districts such as **Drochia**, **Rîșcani**, and **Basarabasca** offered a view into more peripheral or semi-rural realities, where fewer institutions are physically present and where reliance on **mobile paralegal teams** is higher. In these regions, respondents emphasized the importance of **community-based legal interventions**, particularly when formal legal institutions were far away or seen as unresponsive.

Urban vs. Rural Distribution

Beyond locality, the data distinguishes between **urban and rural residential environments**, offering further insight into justice accessibility:

Urban residents: 1,015 respondents (58.5%)

Rural residents: 720 respondents (41.5%)

This relatively balanced urban-rural split is particularly significant. While urban respondents generally have closer physical proximity to legal offices and greater exposure to legal information (e.g. media campaigns, NGO outreach), they are not immune to systemic delays, high service costs, or institutional indifference.

Rural respondents, in contrast, face distinct and layered challenges: **Long distances** to courthouses or legal aid centers; **Poor transportation infrastructure**; **Low digital connectivity**, which restricts access to online legal platforms; And a **lack of anonymity in small communities**, which discourages individuals from reporting sensitive issues such as domestic violence or exploitation.

Moreover, rural areas are more likely to rely on **paralegals**—often the only consistent legal actors available locally. These professionals frequently serve as the bridge between underserved communities and the national legal system, but they themselves operate with limited resources and institutional recognition.

The geographic data demonstrates that **legal exclusion in Moldova is spatially uneven**. Access to justice is not just a matter of individual need, but of **where one lives**. People in regions like Găgăuzia or remote parts of Drochia may experience legal need more acutely but have **fewer institutional pathways to resolve it**.

Efforts to improve legal accessibility must therefore: Strengthen the presence of **mobile legal teams** and **community paralegals**; Expand **regional legal infrastructure**, especially in underserved districts; Promote **digital equity**, ensuring that rural citizens can access online resources; And recognize that **geography is a core determinant of legal opportunity**.

By integrating spatial analysis into policy design, Moldova can build a legal aid system that is both **geographically just and institutionally responsive**, ensuring that rurality does not translate into legal invisibility.

Education Level

The educational background of respondents provides critical insight into the types of individuals seeking legal support in Moldova. The survey data reveals that:

858 respondents (approximately **44.7%** of the total sample) reported having completed **secondary education**, including high school, vocational, or technical school. This group forms the backbone of the legal aid user base. Many within this cohort likely encounter challenges related to employment disputes, family law, and access to public services. Although they possess moderate education, their understanding of legal rights and procedures may be insufficient for navigating legal institutions without support.

488 respondents (around **25.4%**) had obtained **higher education** (bachelor's or master's degrees). The presence of this group in legal aid services challenges the notion that legal vulnerability is tied exclusively to low education. These individuals may face structural issues—such as unemployment, housing insecurity, or discrimination—that override educational advantage.

356 respondents (roughly **18.5%**) had only completed **lower secondary education**, typically up to the 9th grade. This group likely includes many individuals with limited legal literacy and less access to institutional pathways for asserting their rights.

A small number—**12 respondents** (just **0.6%**)—held **postgraduate degrees** (PhDs or equivalent). While this group is statistically minor, their presence affirms that even highly educated individuals may require legal support when faced with complex or discriminatory systems.

These findings confirm that **legal need transcends educational background**, and that access to justice is often influenced more by systemic and economic barriers than by formal qualifications alone.

Vulnerability Status

When asked to self-identify as part of a vulnerable group, **669 respondents** (representing **34.8%** of the sample) selected **“None”**. This outcome warrants careful interpretation. On one hand, it may reflect a segment of the population that does not meet official definitions of vulnerability (such as disability, poverty, or refugee status). On the other hand, it may also

indicate: A **lack of awareness** or clarity regarding what constitutes a “vulnerable status”; **Stigma or reluctance** to self-identify as vulnerable; Or limitations in the survey tool, which may have **failed to capture nuanced or context-specific forms of exclusion** (such as mental health conditions, informal labor status, or linguistic barriers).

In contrast, the **qualitative data** from focus groups paints a more complex picture. Many respondents and stakeholders described forms of vulnerability that were **multifaceted and overlapping**, such as: Extreme poverty coupled with lack of documentation; Gender-based violence combined with social isolation; Long-term unemployment among marginalized ethnic groups (e.g. Roma, Gagauz); Institutional neglect of persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

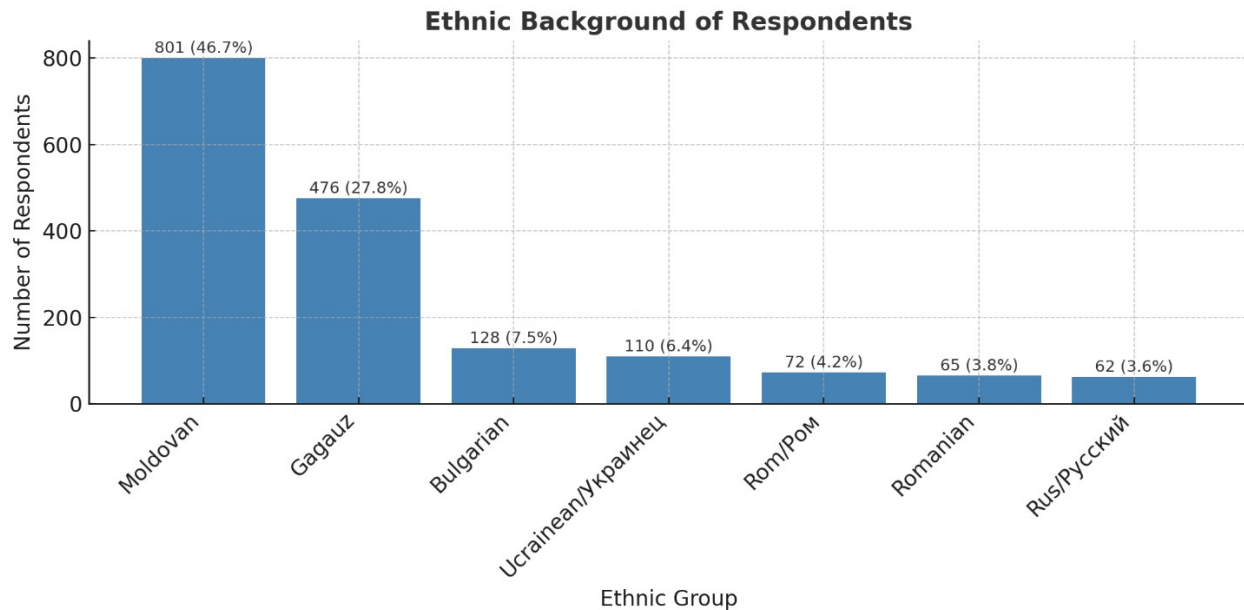
These realities suggest that the **official figure of 34.8% “not vulnerable” likely underrepresents the true scale of legal vulnerability** in Moldova. Structural disadvantages, even when not formally acknowledged, significantly hinder access to justice.

This finding aligns with broader international research, which shows that individuals facing **compound disadvantages**—such as being poor, uneducated, rural, and part of an ethnic minority—are far more likely to experience injustice but less likely to recognize or articulate it as such.

Hence, any analysis or intervention strategy must consider both the **visible and invisible dimensions of vulnerability**, and actively work to identify and address **hidden populations** who fall through the cracks of conventional legal support systems.

Ethnic Background

The survey captured a wide ethnic diversity, with the largest groups identifying as **Moldovan, Romanian, Gagauz, Roma, and Bulgarian**. This ethnic heterogeneity is crucial for understanding how **language barriers, cultural perceptions of justice, and systemic discrimination** may affect legal outcomes and access.



The ethnic composition of respondents reveals Moldova’s multicultural landscape and emphasizes how ethnic identity intersects with access to justice. The survey captured responses from several ethnic communities, reflecting both the demographic reality of the country and the regional diversity of the study areas.

Key Statistical Findings

Out of all respondents who disclosed their ethnicity, the distribution was as follows: **Moldovan:** 801 respondents, representing **46.7%** of the sample. **Gagauz:** 476 respondents (**27.8%**) — a substantial minority with strong regional presence in the south. **Bulgarian:** 128 respondents (**7.5%**) — concentrated in southern Moldova. **Ukrainian:** 110 respondents (**6.4%**) — present mainly in border and northern areas. **Roma:** 72 respondents (**4.2%**) — a historically marginalized group with significant legal vulnerabilities.

This breakdown shows that while ethnic Moldovans make up the largest proportion of respondents, a considerable share of the survey base came from **ethnic minorities**, many of whom are concentrated in geographically or administratively peripheral areas.

Ethnicity and Legal Vulnerability: A Closer Look

Roma Respondents (4.2%)

Although representing a smaller portion of the sample, Roma respondents are statistically among the **most disadvantaged** in terms of legal access. Their low participation in formal justice systems is not reflective of reduced need, but rather of: Deep-seated **mistrust of authorities**, Experiences of **discrimination**, **Language and literacy barriers**, and **Geographic isolation** from legal institutions.

Focus group narratives highlighted how Roma individuals often avoid formal complaints due to fear of mistreatment or disbelief, even when facing serious rights violations such as police abuse, evictions, or exclusion from public services.

Gagauz Respondents (27.8%)

The Gagauz population was heavily represented due to the study's inclusion of southern Moldova and the Comrat Legal Clinic. Despite being a formally recognized autonomous group, **language barriers** (primarily Russian-speaking), limited access to information in their native language, and **geographical remoteness** remain key obstacles to justice. Many expressed discomfort or confusion in dealing with institutions that operate exclusively in Romanian.

Furthermore, the relocation of legal aid services from Comrat to Cahul was cited as a **practical barrier**, increasing travel burdens and reducing access for low-income Gagauz families, particularly older individuals and single mothers.

Bulgarian and Ukrainian Respondents (13.9% combined)

These groups, primarily found in southern and border areas, also face **linguistic and procedural barriers**, although to a lesser extent than the Gagauz. Their access to legal aid is often influenced more by **regional infrastructure** and **digital exclusion** than by direct ethnic discrimination. However, their low representation in leadership or public-facing legal positions contributes to feelings of institutional distance and lack of representation.

Moldovan Respondents (46.7%)

Although Moldovans formed the largest group, their experiences of justice varied widely depending on their **residential context (urban vs. rural)**, **socioeconomic position**, and **gender**. For example, Moldovan women from rural districts faced legal exclusion due to **domestic violence, poverty, or lack of transport**, even though they did not experience ethnic marginalization.

The ethnic profile of respondents reveals that **ethnicity must be considered a structural variable when assessing access to justice** in Moldova. While Moldovans comprise the majority, ethnic minorities—especially **Gagauz, Roma, Bulgarians, and Ukrainians**—experience **language, cultural, and logistical barriers** that limit their participation in legal processes.

Efforts to improve legal access must: Offer **culturally tailored legal information**, Include **interpreters and translated materials**, Promote **minority representation among paralegals and legal professionals**, and Address the **institutional biases** that fuel exclusion.

By acknowledging and responding to these ethnic disparities, Moldova can move toward a justice system that is truly inclusive—where access is defined not just by legal entitlement, but by practical ability to understand, engage, and obtain remedy through the law.

4. Types of Legal Assistance Received

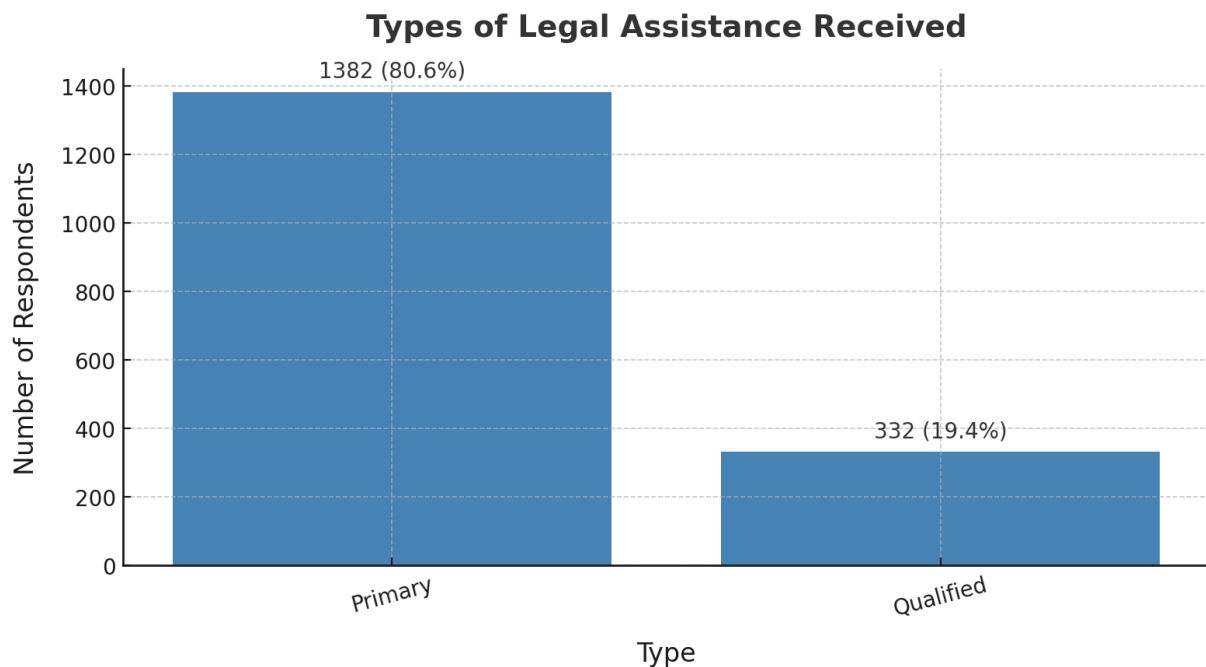
Legal aid in Moldova is structured across two primary categories: **primary legal assistance**, which includes basic legal information and advice, and **qualified legal assistance**, which entails formal representation in legal proceedings and more complex interventions. The survey data reveals that access to these two types of support is **heavily imbalanced**, with significant implications for how citizens navigate justice.

Key Statistical Findings

Among all respondents:

1,382 individuals (80.6%) received **primary legal assistance**

332 individuals (19.4%) received **qualified legal assistance**



This distribution shows that **four out of five legal aid users received only primary support**, typically consisting of: Legal consultations; Explanations of procedures; Help drafting complaints or filling out documents; Referrals to relevant institutions.

This form of aid is vital for enabling people to understand their rights and take initial steps toward legal resolution. It is also the most accessible type of support, often delivered by **paralegals, community-based legal advisors, or NGOs**, especially in rural areas and underserved regions.

Primary Legal Assistance: Widespread but Limited in Scope

The predominance of primary legal assistance reflects several systemic realities: It is **faster and cheaper to deliver**, making it the preferred method of many NGOs and legal clinics. Many individuals have **basic legal needs** (e.g., administrative assistance, minor disputes) that do not require court representation. In some cases, **qualified assistance is unavailable**, inaccessible, or delayed due to resource constraints, meaning that people rely on primary aid even for complex problems.

While essential, primary assistance **cannot replace legal representation** in cases that go to court. Without qualified support, vulnerable individuals may abandon legal claims or face proceedings unprepared.

Qualified Legal Assistance: Necessary but Less Accessible

Only **one in five respondents** received **qualified legal assistance**, which includes: Representation in court or administrative hearings; Legal defense in criminal cases; Preparation of formal legal documents for trial; Follow-up throughout litigation or appeals.

This lower rate of qualified assistance raises concerns about **equity and effectiveness** in Moldova's legal aid system. Focus group participants pointed out several reasons for this gap: **Shortage of public defenders or legal aid lawyers**, especially outside urban centers; **Long waiting times and complex eligibility requirements**; **Lack of awareness** about the availability of free qualified legal aid; **Stigma or fear** about involving formal legal actors in family or community conflicts.

In regions such as Găgăuzia and northern rural districts, paralegals frequently act as the **de facto primary legal system**, with few pathways to escalate cases to the formal court system.

The stark imbalance between primary and qualified legal assistance points to a **two-tier legal aid system**, where most citizens receive only basic support—useful, but often insufficient—while only a minority access full legal protection through formal representation.

Recommendations to address this disparity include: Expanding the **network of qualified legal aid providers**, particularly in rural and minority regions; Streamlining **referral mechanisms** from paralegals to licensed attorneys; Increasing **state funding** for qualified legal defense in civil and administrative cases; And ensuring **public awareness campaigns** about the right to free legal representation.

Legal empowerment begins with information, but it must lead to representation—otherwise, the justice system risks becoming accessible in theory, but exclusive in practice.

5. Evaluation of Legal Service Providers

The survey asked respondents to evaluate a range of legal service providers based on their experience between 2021 and 2024. These included lawyers, judges, prosecutors, paralegals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of the Ombudsman's office, and government officials. Ratings were given on a **scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent)**.

Key Quantitative Findings

The average ratings and response volume for each provider are summarized below:

NGO representatives: 3.75 / 5 (highest rating)

Lawyers: 3.37 / 5

Judges: 3.33 / 5

Prosecutors: 2.99 / 5

Paralegals : 2.77 / 5 (lowest rating)

Respondent base: 1,713 evaluations per provider

Interpreting the Ratings: Perception vs. Structure

1. NGOs: Trusted Intermediaries in a Fragile System

NGO representatives received the **highest average rating (3.75)**. This finding aligns with the earlier insights that NGOs are often **the first and most consistent point of contact** for vulnerable populations. Respondents cited: Better communication, Non-judgmental attitudes, Practical assistance (e.g. help with documents, translation, emotional support), And consistent presence in rural or underserved areas.

Particularly in **Găgăuzia, Rîșcani, and Drochia**, NGOs often step in where public institutions are either under-resourced or distrusted. These organizations are also seen as **less bureaucratic and more human-centered**, which matters deeply for individuals with low confidence in the justice system.

2. Lawyers and Judges: Competence Perceived, but Gaps Remain

Lawyers and judges received relatively strong scores (**3.37 and 3.33**, respectively), suggesting a degree of public respect and perceived competence. However, focus group discussions revealed underlying frustration with: **Accessibility**: Many people cannot afford private legal services and often struggle to reach a public defender. **Responsiveness**: Cases are delayed, procedural language is inaccessible, and outcomes can feel predetermined. **Attitudes toward vulnerable groups**: Judges in particular were criticized for being formalistic and lacking empathy, especially in family law cases or when dealing with Roma or LGBTQ+ individuals.

For respondents from **rural areas**, or those with **lower education levels**, navigating court procedures felt intimidating. This lowered satisfaction even when the technical quality of legal representation was adequate.

3. Paralegals: Critical Role, Low Visibility

Paralegals (Parajuriștii) received the lowest average rating (**2.77**), which may seem contradictory given their prominent role in rural access to justice. This score likely reflects **systemic rather than individual limitations**, including: High caseloads, Limited legal authority (they cannot represent in court), Insufficient resources for transport, printing, or communication, And lack of formal recognition by the justice system.

Despite these challenges, paralegals were often praised during focus groups as **indispensable in rural Moldova**, acting as legal guides, translators, and social liaisons. The low score may be a result of **unmet expectations**, rather than poor performance.

4. Prosecutors and State Representatives: Lack of Trust and Approachability

Prosecutors scored just **2.99**, reflecting **widespread distrust** of prosecutorial independence and fairness. Respondents—particularly victims of domestic violence and ethnic minorities—shared stories of **indifference, delays, or even hostility** when filing complaints.

This aligns with earlier data showing that many vulnerable individuals fear institutional retaliation or dismissal. For example: Roma respondents frequently described being treated as untrustworthy. Women survivors of violence were often discouraged from pursuing charges or not taken seriously. Youth and refugees faced dismissive or impatient attitudes when engaging with state officials.

These patterns underscore that **legal culture**, not just legal access, shapes public perception of justice.

Conclusion: Rebuilding Confidence through Proximity and Empathy

The evaluation of legal service providers paints a clear picture: **citizens value those who are present, respectful, and helpful**—not necessarily those with the most institutional power. NGOs and paralegals, although structurally weaker, are rated highly for their accessibility and care. By contrast, formal institutions, while better resourced, are often seen as remote or indifferent.

This has significant policy implications: **Invest in frontline legal services**—paralegals, legal aid NGOs, and community outreach. **Improve training and accountability** for prosecutors and judges in working with vulnerable populations. **Create referral pathways** from paralegals and NGOs to public defenders and state agencies. **Embed empathy and plain-language communication** in the justice system's culture.

If justice in Moldova is to be more inclusive and legitimate, then **those delivering it must be visible, trusted, and culturally competent.**

6. Perceived Changes in Access to Justice (2021–2024)

Over the last three years, Moldova’s legal environment has seen both incremental efforts and persistent obstacles in delivering accessible justice. Although the dataset did not yield structured quantitative responses to this question, the qualitative insights gathered through focus groups and stakeholder consultations provide a rich foundation for understanding how different groups perceive change—or the lack thereof.

For many respondents, especially those in vulnerable situations, **access to justice has remained largely unchanged.** This perception does not necessarily stem from a worsening of conditions, but rather from the **persistence of institutional stagnation.** Participants consistently described the justice system as distant, complex, and difficult to navigate, especially without legal knowledge or support.

In rural areas and marginalized communities, people often spoke of knowing their rights in theory, but being unable to act on them in practice. Long delays, procedural hurdles, and the absence of reliable follow-up from authorities contributed to the sense that **justice was something technically available but practically unreachable.** In Bălți and across northern Moldova, many respondents expressed disappointment that while they might now understand what steps to take—thanks in part to legal education campaigns and paralegal guidance—they still **lacked the means or confidence** to pursue those steps through formal institutions.

However, this perception was not uniform. In localities where NGOs and paralegals were active and visible, citizens reported **some improvement** in their sense of legal empowerment. They felt more informed, more supported, and less isolated when dealing with legal issues. These improvements were not attributed to the justice system itself, but to the **intervention of trusted intermediaries** who helped individuals navigate a system that otherwise seemed opaque.

For instance, Găgăuzia and Rîșcani saw tangible results from the presence of mobile legal teams and NGO outreach. While participants did not describe the system as reformed or efficient, they noted that the **emergence of human contact points—people who listened, explained, and accompanied them—made a significant difference** in how they perceived justice.

On the other hand, communities without such intermediaries described their experience in starkly different terms. Victims of domestic violence, members of the Roma community, individuals with disabilities, and refugees consistently reported that **their treatment by institutions remained superficial, discriminatory, or outright dismissive.** For these groups, even raising a legal concern could result in stigma, retraumatization, or institutional neglect.

Younger participants—especially those between 25 and 35—showed signs of greater awareness of their rights, but this often clashed with a growing disillusionment. Many felt **frustrated by digital barriers, bureaucracy, or fear that their case would go nowhere**. For them, knowledge of the law did not translate into faith in the system.

It would be fair to summarize that the majority of respondents, if asked directly whether access to justice had improved, worsened, or remained the same, would have chosen the third option. They did not necessarily believe the system had deteriorated; they simply felt that **nothing had changed in ways that affected their daily lives**. A smaller but notable group—mostly those working with or benefiting from NGO support—would have cited modest improvements, while the most marginalized populations were more likely to describe a slow erosion of trust and access.

This overall picture is one of **fragmented progress**. Where legal services are brought closer to the community—through paralegals, local legal clinics, or NGO collaboration—people experience more agency, more trust, and better outcomes. Where those services are absent, the system feels as remote and unyielding as ever.

The findings suggest that **justice in Moldova is evolving, but unevenly**. Real improvements are not driven by institutional reform alone but by the **presence of empathy, clarity, and continuity in human interaction**. Until these qualities are embedded across the justice system, change will continue to be experienced as occasional, localized relief rather than broad, systemic transformation.

7. Recommendations from Respondents

In addition to sharing their experiences, survey participants were asked to offer **concrete suggestions** for improving both **access to justice** and the **quality of legal services**. These open-ended responses offer valuable insight into the public's expectations and perceived gaps in the justice system. While suggestions varied by background and region, clear themes emerged that echo the concerns raised during focus group discussions and stakeholder interviews.

Improving Access to Justice

Across responses, citizens emphasized the importance of **proximity, visibility, and communication** in justice services. A recurring demand was for the **expansion of legal aid networks**, particularly through NGOs and community-based organizations. Many suggested that justice should begin not in the courtroom, but in the community.

One of the most frequent suggestions was the need for **more legal aid organizations**. Respondents expressed that existing services are **not sufficiently widespread**, particularly in rural areas or in regions like Găgăuzia and northern Moldova. There was a clear call for the

establishment of **mobile legal teams** that could reach individuals with limited mobility, financial means, or digital access.

Other respondents pointed to the need for **better information dissemination**. They argued that people often don't know where to go for legal help, what their rights are, or how to file complaints. This underscores a critical gap not in service provision itself, but in **legal literacy**. Citizens recommended more **awareness campaigns**—especially in simple, accessible language and through media channels commonly used in their communities.

Additionally, some respondents called for **more legal professionals (lawyers and paralegals)** to be made available in underserved areas. The perception is that demand exceeds capacity, especially for free or affordable legal assistance.

"It's not that people don't care about their rights—they just don't know where to start," one respondent wrote.

A small but notable share of responses reflected a degree of hopelessness or disengagement. The answer "I don't know" appeared frequently, suggesting that some citizens feel **disempowered or disconnected** from the idea that the justice system can change—or that their input matters.

Improving the Quality of Legal Services

When asked how legal services could be improved, respondents were **less concerned with structure and more focused on behavior, professionalism, and accountability**.

A common recommendation was to **increase the salaries or compensation** for those who provide legal aid. The logic behind this is practical: better remuneration would attract more skilled professionals and reduce burnout among existing staff, many of whom operate under high pressure and limited resources.

Respondents also emphasized the need for **ongoing training and professional development**, especially for lawyers, judges, and paralegals who work directly with vulnerable groups. Several responses mentioned the importance of **specialized instruction** in areas like: Human rights and anti-discrimination; Gender-based violence; Child protection; Disability rights; Trauma-informed legal practice.

This reflects a growing awareness that legal service quality is not just about knowing the law, but about **how professionals engage with clients**, especially those who are vulnerable, traumatized, or distrustful of institutions.

Several individuals also proposed the creation of a **more transparent and responsive feedback system**. One participant recommended a "real system for complaints and appeals," suggesting that many people have had negative experiences that were never acknowledged or addressed by the institutions involved.

“We need a way to hold legal actors accountable—not just judges, but everyone,” said one participant in Bălți.

The recommendations made by respondents reflect a **mature understanding of the justice system’s weaknesses** and the **pragmatic needs of citizens**. They are not calling for sweeping legislative reforms, but for tangible changes in how services are delivered, who delivers them, and how those actors relate to the people they serve.

Key themes include: **Expanding community-based legal access; Investing in public legal education; Improving professional training and morale; Creating transparent, client-centered feedback mechanisms.**

Citizens want a justice system that is not only accessible, but **empathetic, accountable, and culturally aware**. These suggestions should serve not just as feedback, but as a **roadmap for institutional reform**, particularly for state actors and civil society organizations seeking to improve Moldova’s legal landscape.

8. Gender-Based Analysis of Access to Justice

This chapter provides a dedicated exploration of how gender influences access to and experiences with the justice system in Moldova. While gender differences are often acknowledged anecdotally, this analysis draws directly from both **quantitative survey results** and **qualitative field data** to identify where and how experiences diverge between women and men—and what these differences imply for justice policy and service delivery.

Gender Profile of Respondents

Out of all participants, **56.4% identified as female**, and **43.6% as male**. This gender distribution reflects broader trends seen across Moldova and other countries in the region, where women are often more likely to seek legal assistance—especially in matters related to **family law, domestic violence, child protection, and social welfare**.

The higher engagement of women with the legal aid system also suggests that they are more exposed to legal vulnerabilities, either due to **their caregiving roles, economic insecurity, or targeted forms of violence**.

Gender Differences in Legal Service Ratings

When asked to rate their satisfaction with legal service providers, men and women reported notably different experiences:

Service Provider	Female Avg. Rating	Male Avg. Rating
NGO	3.83	3.64
Lawyer	3.42	3.30
Judge	3.39	3.24
Prosecutor	3.03	2.94

Paralegal	2.67	2.90
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Overall, **female respondents rated legal actors more positively** across most categories. This may reflect both **more frequent interaction with legal services** and greater reliance on **support-oriented roles** such as NGOs and legal clinics.

Interestingly, **paralegals were the only group rated higher by men**, which may point to a greater male reliance on these actors for issues like **employment disputes, criminal procedure, or property conflicts**—areas where paralegals serve as crucial local guides but have limited formal authority.

The **high rating of NGOs by women** (3.83) compared to men (3.64) reaffirms their role as **safe, empathetic, and effective intermediaries**, especially for women navigating trauma, legal complexity, or institutional distrust.

Qualitative Perspectives on Gender and Justice

Focus group discussions further reinforced the gendered nature of legal access. Women frequently discussed their experiences with: **Institutional indifference in cases of domestic violence, Delayed court proceedings on child custody or alimony, And the absence of psychological or social support** during legal intervention.

Women in rural districts, in particular, described **barriers not just in access to legal help, but in being heard and believed** by authorities. Several recounted experiences where police officers or judges minimized their complaints, or where legal procedures were so complex that they abandoned them altogether.

In contrast, male participants were more likely to reference: **Discrimination in employment, Struggles with re-integration after incarceration, And a general sense of being misunderstood or presumed guilty** by legal institutions.

Importantly, men were less likely to seek legal aid proactively. This was often attributed to **stigma, pride**, or a cultural expectation that men should “resolve things privately.” This aligns with the slightly lower average satisfaction among male respondents, who may engage with legal systems **only at crisis points**, when problems are already escalated and outcomes are harder to influence.

Implications for Gender-Responsive Justice Reform

This gender-based analysis offers several key implications for designing more inclusive justice interventions: **Legal outreach should be tailored to engage men** earlier in legal disputes, particularly in employment and administrative matters. **Domestic violence services must go beyond court access**, integrating emotional, economic, and housing support—especially for women. **Gender-sensitivity training** for police, lawyers, and judges should be mandatory and ongoing. **Service delivery should reflect the different motivations** that drive women and men to seek justice—and the different obstacles they face once they do.

Finally, NGOs and community-based actors should continue playing their critical bridging role—particularly in communities where gender biases in formal institutions remain entrenched.

9. Urban vs. Rural Disparities in Access to Justice

Geography continues to be one of the most defining factors in shaping the quality, accessibility, and experience of legal services in Moldova. While national frameworks and legal aid programs are designed to be universally available, their implementation—and impact—varies significantly between urban and rural contexts. This chapter explores how location influences both perceptions of justice and actual service delivery, based on both structured survey data and qualitative insights from the field.

Residential Profile of Respondents

Among all survey respondents, **58.5% lived in urban areas**, while **41.5% were from rural communities**. This relatively balanced representation provides a robust foundation for comparative analysis, allowing the report to contrast the **structural accessibility** and **subjective experiences** of justice between these two environments.

Service Provider Ratings: Subtle but Telling Gaps

When asked to evaluate the performance of legal service providers, urban and rural respondents showed largely similar perceptions—but with subtle distinctions that reflect deeper access challenges.

Service Provider	Urban Avg.	Rural Avg.
NGO	3.77	3.73
Lawyer	3.37	3.37
Judge	3.38	3.28
Prosecutor	3.02	2.97
Paralegal	2.76	2.78

Although differences are modest, the data shows that **urban residents consistently rated formal justice actors slightly higher**—particularly judges and prosecutors. This may reflect better infrastructure, more exposure to institutional actors, or easier access to legal resources in urban centers.

However, it is noteworthy that **lawyers and paralegals were rated nearly identically** in both environments, and NGOs remained the **most trusted actors across the board**. This suggests that trust and satisfaction are more influenced by **approachability and proximity** than by institutional authority or location.

Qualitative Insights: Disparity in Practice, Not in Principle

While survey scores suggest parity, focus group discussions reveal a **more complex reality**.

In **urban areas** like Bălți, respondents often had **easier physical access to legal institutions**, and could choose between multiple providers. They also reported **higher digital access**, which

made it easier to submit documents online, communicate with institutions, and search for legal information.

In contrast, **rural participants described long travel times, inconsistent contact with authorities, and near-total dependence on local paralegals or NGOs.** Many mentioned that even if they were aware of their rights, the **costs of travel, time off work, or document preparation** made formal justice inaccessible.

A recurring theme in rural areas was the **lack of anonymity and social risk** involved in seeking legal aid—particularly in cases of domestic violence or family conflict. Several participants stated that reporting abuse or initiating legal action would expose them to social backlash, or even retaliation, in small, tightly-knit communities.

Justice is Closer in Cities—But Not Necessarily Fairer

Urban respondents had **greater access to legal help**, but this did not always translate into **higher levels of trust.** Many described **bureaucratic inefficiencies, long delays, and unclear procedures,** particularly in larger courts. Several younger participants also expressed **disillusionment with institutional processes,** despite having the knowledge and tools to engage them.

This highlights a critical point: **access alone does not guarantee justice.** Even in cities, where services are technically more available, individuals still face barriers in the form of **language complexity, economic strain, or institutional indifference.**

In light of these findings, the following steps are recommended to reduce rural-urban disparities and strengthen justice delivery across all of Moldova:

1. **Expand mobile legal aid services and legal caravans** in remote and rural areas.
2. **Increase state funding for rural paralegals,** including transport stipends and digital infrastructure.
3. **Simplify digital submission platforms** and support rural citizens with digital literacy training.
4. **Establish satellite legal offices or drop-in centers** in villages with high case volumes.
5. **Promote anonymous legal help options** (e.g. hotlines, online portals) for socially sensitive issues in rural areas.

While Moldova's legal framework is nationally unified, the experience of accessing justice is still shaped by **where a person lives.** Urban residents benefit from proximity, choice, and infrastructure—but not always from institutional responsiveness. Rural citizens often experience deep legal need but face significant logistical, economic, and cultural barriers to fulfilling it.

The vision for a truly inclusive justice system must account for these geographic dynamics, ensuring that **justice is not a matter of distance, but of design.**

10. Ethnic Disparities in Access to Justice

Moldova is a multiethnic society, home to Moldovans, Gagauz, Roma, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Russians, and other minority groups. While the legal system is designed to serve all citizens equally, the lived experiences of these groups reveal persistent gaps in access, treatment, and trust. This chapter draws from both quantitative survey data and qualitative field feedback to explore how ethnicity influences perceptions of justice, engagement with legal services, and confidence in institutions.

Ethnic Profile of Respondents

Among the top five ethnic groups in the dataset:

Moldovans comprised **46.7%** of respondents.

Gagauz made up **27.8%**.

Bulgarians represented **7.5%**.

Ukrainians made up **6.4%**.

Roma accounted for **4.2%**.

This ethnic distribution provides a meaningful sample for analysis and highlights the importance of inclusive, multilingual legal systems, particularly in autonomous and border regions such as Găgăuzia and Taraclia.

Differences in Perception of Legal Service Providers

When asked to rate their satisfaction with legal service providers, significant variation emerged across ethnic lines:

Service Provider	Ukrainian	Moldovan	Gagauz	Bulgarian	Roma
NGO	4.12	3.72	3.73	3.40	3.51
Judge	3.49	3.40	3.25	3.08	2.78
Lawyer	3.66	3.36	3.37	3.33	3.01
Prosecutor	3.01	2.94	3.15	2.98	2.56
Paralegal	2.43	2.45	3.38	3.23	2.82

These figures offer several important insights:

Roma respondents consistently gave the lowest ratings to all providers, especially prosecutors (2.56) and judges (2.78). This reflects a **deep distrust of formal institutions**, likely shaped by repeated experiences of discrimination and marginalization.

Ukrainian respondents were the most satisfied overall, with particularly strong scores for NGOs (4.12) and judges (3.49). This may reflect recent humanitarian support networks and multilingual outreach efforts in northern Moldova.

Gagauz and Bulgarian respondents showed mixed confidence. While Gagauz respondents rated paralegals notably high (3.38), they also expressed concerns in qualitative feedback about language accessibility and fear of engaging with Romanian-speaking institutions.

Moldovan respondents, despite being the ethnic majority, still expressed moderate ratings for paralegals (2.45) and prosecutors (2.94), suggesting that even ethnic privilege does not protect against structural inefficiencies.

Barriers Faced by Ethnic Minorities

Focus group participants from minority groups described a series of specific challenges, including:

Language barriers in legal communication, particularly for Gagauz and Bulgarians.

Fear of discrimination or being dismissed by police, especially among Roma respondents.

Lack of cultural mediators or legal professionals from minority communities.

Administrative complexity for refugees and stateless persons, especially Ukrainians with temporary protection.

Roma participants emphasized that legal procedures are often inaccessible to those without formal education, documentation, or digital literacy. Many reported avoiding the justice system entirely unless accompanied by an NGO advocate.

Meanwhile, Gagauz respondents shared frustration over the relocation of legal aid administration from Comrat to Cahul, increasing both **geographic and linguistic distance** from services.

Institutional Response and Public Trust

Ethnic minorities expressed the highest trust in **NGOs**, especially those with community-based staff, translation services, and flexible working hours. These organizations were often seen not only as legal actors but as **cultural bridges** that mitigated fear, explained procedures, and ensured respectful treatment.

State actors—particularly **prosecutors and judges**—were rated lower, often described as bureaucratic, inaccessible, or dismissive. This was especially true for Roma communities, where institutional mistrust remains a major barrier to reporting abuse or defending rights.

To reduce disparities and increase the engagement of ethnic minorities with legal institutions, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Expand multilingual legal aid materials**, especially in Gagauz, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Romani.
2. **Recruit and train paralegals and legal advisors from minority backgrounds**, or with proven cultural competence.
3. **Integrate legal aid services with social services** and humanitarian programs, especially for displaced or stateless persons.
4. **Fund NGO networks** that act as trusted intermediaries in Roma, Gagauz, and refugee communities.
5. **Establish mobile units with translation capacity** to visit isolated or minority-majority villages on a regular basis.

The disparities highlighted in this chapter are not only statistical—they are historical, structural, and cultural. Equal access to justice cannot be achieved without acknowledging the **specific fears, needs, and contexts of ethnic minorities**. Whether it is a Roma woman avoiding the police, a Gagauz man intimidated by Romanian-language paperwork, or a Ukrainian refugee uncertain of their rights, the solution lies not just in offering services—but in **offering services people can trust, understand, and afford to use**.

Justice in a multiethnic society must be **as diverse, adaptable, and respectful** as the people it serves.

11. Access to Justice by Vulnerability Status

Legal vulnerability is shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by how institutions respond to those circumstances. People who are unemployed, single parents, or living with overlapping disadvantages often face **systemic and cumulative barriers** to justice. This chapter explores how different vulnerability statuses affect both the accessibility and perceived quality of legal services in Moldova.

Overview of Vulnerability in the Dataset

Among survey respondents: **Unemployed individuals** made up a significant share of those reporting legal vulnerability. **Single parents** were another key group facing distinct challenges in legal engagement. A large number of respondents—**34.8%**—selected "none" as their vulnerability status. However, as seen throughout this report, many still face structural disadvantages despite not formally identifying as vulnerable.

This discrepancy between self-identified vulnerability and lived legal need suggests a **gap in public understanding or acknowledgment of what constitutes legal exclusion.**

Provider Ratings by Vulnerability Status

Average satisfaction ratings across key service providers highlight important disparities in experience:

Service Provider	No Vulnerability	Unemployed	Single Parent
NGO	3.76	3.87	3.72
Judge	3.58	3.35	3.02
Lawyer	3.40	3.36	3.25
Prosecutor	3.15	3.00	2.77
Paralegal	2.73	2.64	2.64

Several insights stand out from this data:

NGOs are clearly the most trusted service provider, regardless of vulnerability status. Unemployed respondents, in particular, rated NGOs very highly (3.87), likely due to their consistent presence and flexible approach to support.

Single parents rated nearly all legal actors lower than any other group, especially judges and prosecutors. This may reflect negative experiences related to family law, custody disputes, or inconsistent institutional support in enforcing legal protections.

Individuals with **no reported vulnerability** were generally more positive in their evaluations—particularly toward judges (3.58) and prosecutors (3.15). This suggests that familiarity, confidence, or even perceived legitimacy within the system correlates with higher satisfaction.

Structural Challenges for Vulnerable Populations

Focus group data complements these patterns, showing that vulnerable respondents often experience:

Delays in service delivery, especially for court-issued protections or social entitlements.

Frustration with legal complexity, especially when navigating administrative procedures without legal representation.

Negative or dismissive attitudes from institutional actors, particularly in family or social welfare cases.

Single parents, mostly women, described being **judged or undermined** during legal proceedings involving alimony, housing, or custody. Some reported that judges appeared indifferent to their caregiving burdens or assumed ulterior motives.

Unemployed participants, especially in rural areas, emphasized their **dependence on paralegals and NGOs** for any legal information or guidance, as they lacked the means to access private counsel.

A Justice System Shaped by Economic Status

The analysis makes one reality clear: **economic precarity directly affects legal perception and engagement**. Respondents who were unemployed or managing children alone reported **not only greater need for legal aid**, but **less satisfaction with formal institutions**. Their reliance on NGOs and dissatisfaction with public legal actors illustrates a systemic gap between **those who provide support and those who wield authority**.

To address these disparities, Moldova’s legal system must evolve to serve not just the general public, but those whose life situations create compounded risk. Key recommendations include:

1. **Institutionalize vulnerability screening** in legal aid intake forms, so that support can be customized from the outset.
2. **Offer specialized family law support for single parents**, with trained legal professionals who understand caregiving contexts.
3. **Strengthen coordination between legal and social service actors**, especially for unemployed individuals navigating housing, benefits, or employment-related legal issues.
4. **Subsidize legal representation** for economically vulnerable individuals in both civil and administrative cases—not only criminal defense.
5. **Ensure paralegals and NGO advocates are integrated** into state referral systems and legal workflows.

Vulnerability is not a checkbox—it’s a condition shaped by **economic, social, and psychological realities**. A mother caring for three children while battling an eviction notice faces different challenges than a retiree disputing a pension. A young man with no job and no legal documents may fear institutions even more than he needs their help.

For justice to be fair, it must be designed **not only for the average citizen—but for the ones most likely to be excluded from it**.

12. Comparative Analysis: Disparities in Perception of Legal Services

This chapter synthesizes the multidimensional findings of the report by comparing how different demographic groups—based on gender, residence, ethnicity, and vulnerability status—evaluate key legal service providers. These insights, visualized in the dashboard, reveal consistent patterns of inequality, as well as points of institutional trust. They also highlight the complex intersection between identity, context, and access to justice.

Gender-Based Perceptions: A Trust Gap by Experience

Women consistently rated all legal actors slightly higher than men, particularly NGOs and judges. This suggests that women, who made up the majority of respondents (56.4%), not only interact more frequently with legal services but also have **more established pathways of trust**—particularly through support-oriented institutions like legal clinics and NGOs.

Men, by contrast, rated paralegals and prosecutors more positively than women, which could reflect their engagement in **different types of legal issues**, such as employment disputes or administrative conflicts. However, the overall trend suggests that **women experience justice systems as more responsive**, perhaps because they are more likely to seek institutional help in emotionally and socially vulnerable situations (e.g., domestic violence, child custody).

Urban vs Rural: Similar Scores, Unequal Realities

Urban and rural respondents rated most providers similarly, with **minor differences in favor of urban populations** for judges and prosecutors. Lawyers and paralegals received nearly identical scores in both contexts, confirming that they form the core of accessible legal help across all regions.

However, these surface-level similarities mask deeper realities: urban residents generally have **easier physical and digital access** to legal institutions, while rural populations rely more heavily on paralegals and NGOs to navigate the justice system. The slight edge in urban ratings likely reflects not quality differences, but **service availability and institutional proximity**.

Ethnic Disparities: Trust Reflects Inclusion

Ethnicity had the most **pronounced effect on provider ratings**. Roma respondents rated every actor lower than other ethnic groups, particularly prosecutors (2.56) and judges (2.78). This confirms what focus group participants reported: Roma communities **do not feel heard, protected, or treated fairly** in legal proceedings.

In contrast, Ukrainian respondents gave the highest scores, likely reflecting recent improvements in access due to humanitarian outreach and cross-border advocacy. Moldovan, Gagauz, and Bulgarian respondents reported similar satisfaction levels, with Gagauz communities showing slightly more confidence in paralegals.

This data shows that legal trust is closely tied to **language, cultural competence, and historical treatment**. For Roma respondents, low scores across the board reveal not just systemic neglect but **ongoing marginalization**, while other minorities benefit when services are tailored to their linguistic and cultural needs.

Vulnerability Status: The Burden of Disadvantage

The strongest contrast emerges in the panel comparing **vulnerable and non-vulnerable respondents**:

Single parents—predominantly women—rated all service providers lower than any other group. Their dissatisfaction was clearest with judges and prosecutors, likely due to disillusionment with **family law outcomes, delays, and insensitive handling of trauma**.

Unemployed respondents, in contrast, rated NGOs particularly high (3.87), highlighting the role of these organizations as lifelines in contexts of social and economic instability.

Respondents who declared **no vulnerability** consistently rated judges, lawyers, and prosecutors higher, indicating that **structural and psychological confidence** in the legal system increases when basic needs are met and legal issues are less complex or stigmatized.

This reinforces a key theme in the report: the justice system in Moldova functions most effectively for those who **are already resourced, informed, and connected**—and least for those who are most at risk.

Conclusion: Toward an Equitable Justice Landscape

This dashboard analysis brings together four distinct yet intersecting dimensions of disparity. Each group—whether defined by gender, geography, ethnicity, or life condition—experiences Moldova’s justice system differently. Some trust more. Some receive more. Some walk away from the same institution feeling helped, while others feel invisible.

The solution is not one-size-fits-all. Equity in justice requires:

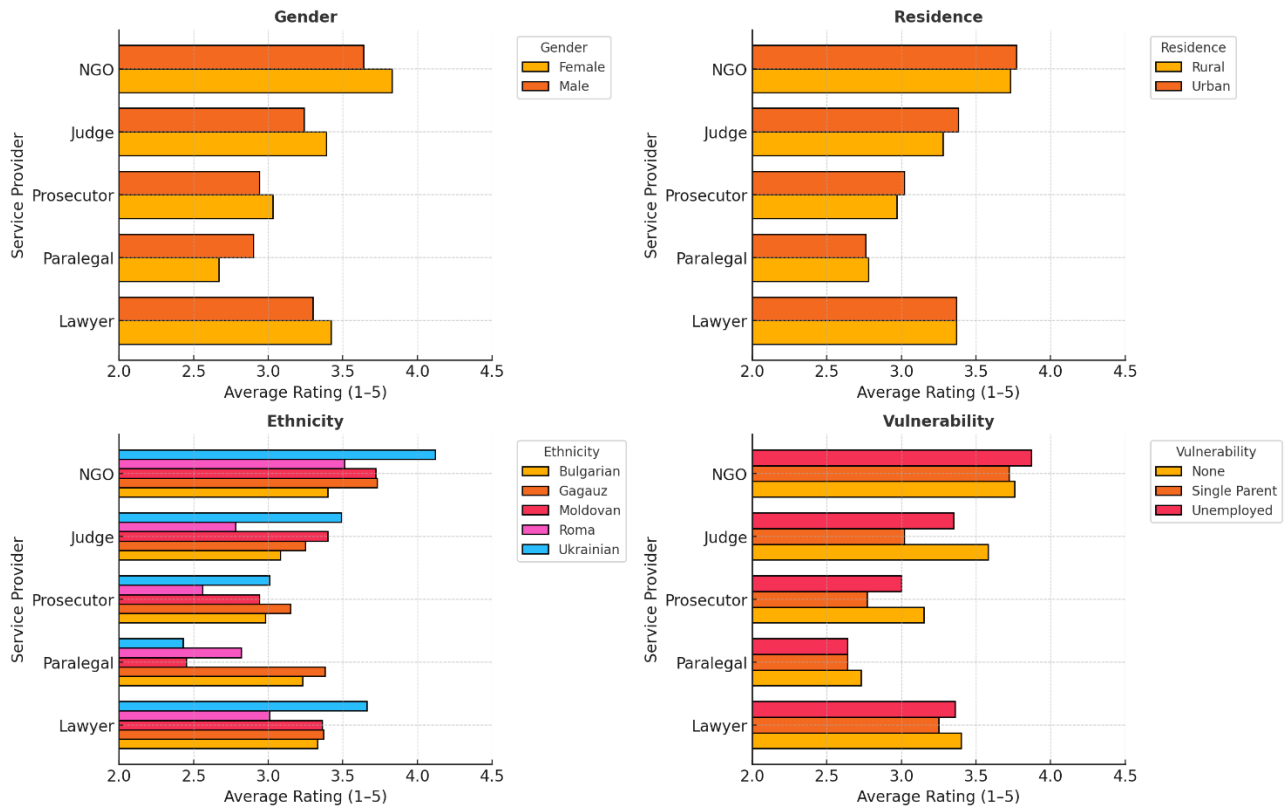
More cultural and gender-sensitive practices,

Expanded rural and community-based legal delivery,

Recognition of structural disadvantage, and

A system that listens not only to procedure, but to people.

Comparative Dashboard: Service Provider Ratings by Demographic Dimension



13. Gap Analysis: Data-Driven Mismatch Between Legal Needs and Service Delivery

While Moldova’s legal aid architecture provides widespread coverage in principle, survey data and focus group insights show clear **quantitative and experiential gaps**. These gaps are not abstract—they are defined by measurable disparities between what people need and what they receive, particularly across dimensions like service type, demographic status, geography, and provider performance.

Gap 1: Qualified Legal Representation vs. Primary Legal Aid

Data Insight:

80.6% of respondents received **only primary legal assistance**—information, referrals, or document support.

Just **19.4%** accessed **qualified legal assistance**, such as legal representation or court support.

Interpretation:

While primary legal aid plays an important role in legal empowerment, it is not sufficient in **complex, high-stakes cases**—family law, domestic violence, property disputes, or administrative hearings. The overwhelming reliance on primary aid reflects a **procedural justice gap**, where people start the legal journey but cannot finish it due to lack of representation.

Gap 2: Institutional Expectations vs. Satisfaction Ratings

Service Provider Ratings by Vulnerability:

Provider	No Vulnerability	Unemployed	Single Parent
NGO	3.76	3.87	3.72
Judge	3.58	3.35	3.02
Prosecutor	3.15	3.00	2.77
Lawyer	3.40	3.36	3.25

Interpretation:

Ratings drop consistently among the most vulnerable. **Single parents—predominantly women—rate judges and prosecutors lowest**, indicating that institutional actors are **not meeting the expectations of empathy, fairness, or efficiency**. This is an institutional responsiveness gap: the more complex the life situation, the less responsive the justice system feels.

Gap 3: Geographic Access vs. Uniform Service Design

Ratings by Residence:

Provider	Urban	Rural
Judge	3.38	3.28
Prosecutor	3.02	2.97
NGO	3.77	3.73
Lawyer	3.37	3.37

Interpretation:

Although the ratings appear close, qualitative data shows that **rural residents often rely on a single paralegal or mobile NGO**, with **limited follow-up and no court representation**. Urban residents benefit from **service density and infrastructure**. This is a **geographic disparity gap**: the service is rated similarly, but only because **expectations are lower where services are scarce**.

Gap 4: Equity in Service vs. Uniform Delivery

Paralegal Ratings by Ethnicity:

Group	Rating
Ukrainian	2.43

Roma	2.82
Moldovan	2.45
Gagauz	3.38
Bulgarian	3.23

Interpretation:

Roma and Ukrainian respondents rate paralegals and other actors lower, suggesting that even where service exists, it may **lack linguistic, cultural, or procedural accessibility**. A Roma woman or an elderly Ukrainian refugee may have entirely different barriers than a Moldovan man—but face **the same tools, in the same language, in the same format**. This is a **service standardization gap** that fails to adapt delivery to need.

Gap 5: Public Engagement vs. System Feedback

Survey Text Insight:

In open responses and focus group sessions, many participants voiced frustration with: **No follow-up on complaints, No way to contest poor treatment, and No place to evaluate legal actors**.

Interpretation:

Despite recurring complaints of mistreatment or dismissiveness by state legal actors, there is **no formal complaints mechanism, feedback form, or performance audit channel**. This is a **systemic accountability gap**—services are delivered without a loop for improvement.

Gap Matrix Summary

Gap Type	Based on Survey Finding	Severity (based on % and rating spread)
Procedural Justice Gap	80.6% received only primary aid	High (underrepresentation of qualified support)
Institutional Responsiveness	Single parents rated judges 3.02 vs. 3.58 by others	Medium–High
Geographic Disparity	Same ratings, but far lower availability in rural areas	Medium
Service Standardization	Roma and Ukrainians gave much lower paralegal ratings	Medium–High
Accountability	No evaluation mechanism or complaint process exists	High

Recommendations for Closing the Gaps

1. **Expand qualified legal aid** access for vulnerable populations. Prioritize cases flagged in primary aid for court follow-up.

2. **Create a formal complaints and feedback mechanism**, both online and in local legal aid offices.
3. **Deploy mobile teams and multilingual outreach** in districts where ethnic minorities and rural residents rate services lower.
4. **Provide targeted support to single parents and unemployed persons**, including dedicated caseworkers and simplified procedures.
5. **Train institutional actors (judges, prosecutors) on communication, bias, and trauma-informed justice.**

The justice system in Moldova does not need to be rebuilt—but it does need to be **rebalanced**. The data is clear: those with fewer resources, greater vulnerability, and more complex life situations receive **less satisfying and less complete legal service**. Gap by gap, these disparities map out **where and how justice reform should begin**.

14. Conclusions and Strategic Recommendations (Data-Integrated)

This report presents a multi-layered analysis of access to justice in Moldova, grounded in quantitative data from 1,713 respondents and qualitative insights from legal professionals, civil society organizations, and vulnerable communities. The conclusions below are drawn directly from the evidence and are intended to support **practical, targeted justice sector reform** that centers equity, responsiveness, and institutional trust.

Key Conclusions: A System Accessible in Form, But Not in Function

1. Primary Legal Aid Dominates, But Does Not Fulfill All Needs

80.6% of respondents received **primary legal aid** only—guidance, forms, basic legal information.

Just **19.4%** received **qualified legal assistance** (court representation, formal advocacy).

This signals a **procedural justice gap**: people begin the legal process but **cannot finish it** due to the absence of representation.

2. Most-Trusted Actors Are Not State-Based

NGOs were the highest-rated legal service providers with an average satisfaction rating of **3.75/5**.

Judges (3.33) and **lawyers (3.37)** received moderate ratings, while **prosecutors (2.99)** and **paralegals (2.77)** scored lower.

Trust is consistently **higher in non-governmental actors**, reflecting the **importance of empathy, accessibility, and follow-up**—qualities many respondents found lacking in formal institutions.

3. Vulnerable Groups Report Lower Satisfaction

Single parents rated most providers significantly lower than others: only **3.02 for judges** and **2.77 for prosecutors**.

Roma respondents gave the lowest scores of any ethnic group across all provider categories (e.g. **2.78 for judges, 2.56 for prosecutors**).

These scores indicate **a mismatch between legal vulnerability and institutional responsiveness**.

4. Urban-Rural Gaps Persist Despite Surface Parity

Ratings between urban and rural respondents were numerically similar, but qualitative insights show that rural residents often **lack options**, rely heavily on one paralegal or NGO, and face **greater travel and informational barriers**.

Geographic equity remains a structural blind spot: urban accessibility masks deep rural legal exclusion.

5. Citizens Perceive Stagnation in Justice Accessibility

Focus group data and narrative responses show that most participants believe access to justice has **“remained the same”** in recent years.

Some saw improvements where **NGOs and paralegals were active**, but these were localized—not systemic.

Without institutional change, **trust remains tied to individual relationships—not public frameworks**.

Strategic Recommendations for Reform

These recommendations are directly drawn from data gaps, stakeholder requests, and respondent evaluations.

A. Expand Qualified Legal Aid

Gap Addressed: 81% receive only primary aid.

Actions:

Allocate funding for **court-based representation in civil, administrative, and family cases**, not just criminal defense.

Formalize **referral pipelines** between paralegals and legal aid lawyers.

Target qualified assistance to groups scoring below 3.0 in satisfaction (e.g., Roma, single parents).

B. Make Justice Culturally and Linguistically Inclusive

Gap Addressed: Low ratings by Roma and Gagauz; language barriers.

Actions:

Provide legal services in **Gagauz, Bulgarian, Romani, and Russian**.

Recruit legal professionals and paralegals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Train justice actors in **bias recognition, cultural mediation, and trauma-informed communication**.

C. Localize Legal Services

Gap Addressed: Structural exclusion of rural and small-town residents.

Actions:

Deploy **mobile legal units and satellite legal aid centers** in underserved districts.

Expand **paralegal support in villages**, with funding for transportation and outreach.

Integrate legal clinics into **existing local infrastructure**: schools, libraries, health centers.

D. Make the System Responsive to Vulnerability

Gap Addressed: Lower ratings by unemployed and single-parent respondents.

Actions:

Build **custom legal aid pathways for high-risk groups**, such as single mothers and displaced persons.

Streamline family court procedures and ensure psychological support is available for survivors of domestic violence.

Provide **publicly subsidized legal aid** for people in poverty or without documentation.

E. Institutionalize Feedback and Evaluation

Gap Addressed: Absence of complaint mechanisms.

Actions:

Require all legal service providers to collect **user satisfaction scores**.

Establish a **central complaints platform**—online and in physical legal aid offices.

Publish **performance dashboards** that track public trust and adjust budgets accordingly.

F. Time Outreach with Engagement Peaks

Gap Addressed: Legal need varies over time; system is not adaptive.

Insights:

Response volume peaked in **September (59 responses)** and **November (29)**.

Drop-offs in August and December may relate to **holidays, staff availability, or reduced outreach**.

Actions:

Schedule awareness campaigns and legal caravans during high-participation months.

Ensure **end-of-year legal services remain operational**, especially for family protection and eviction-related claims.

Final Summary Table: Where Gaps Meet Action

Issue	Data Indicator	Proposed Solution
Underuse of qualified aid	80.6% primary-only aid	Expand representation in civil/family law
Institutional distrust	Scores under 3.0 from vulnerable groups	Bias training, custom legal pathways
Language/culture barrier	Roma & Gagauz ratings 0.5–1.0 points lower	Multilingual services, local recruitment
Rural inaccessibility	Paralegals rated 2.6–2.7 in rural areas	Mobile units, funded outreach
No accountability loop	No rating or complaints system in place	Centralized feedback and complaints portal
Low engagement months	Aug/Dec participation collapse	Align campaigns to civic calendar

A Call to Rebalance, Not Rebuild

The foundations of Moldova’s justice system are structurally sound—but its **equity, empathy, and accessibility** must be reinforced. Vulnerable people **are already seeking justice**; the question is whether the system can **meet them halfway**.

Trust begins where services are: **Qualified, not just informative, Tailored, not templated, Listened to, not managed.**

This report offers the data and the direction. Now, it is the responsibility of lawmakers, funders, and implementers to close the gap between **legal intent and legal impact.**