





Critical Legal Advocacy and Social Transformation: Toward an Integrated Framework for Developing Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Critical legal advocacy plays a pivotal role in advancing social transformation and promoting justice for marginalized communities in developing contexts. However, its transformative potential is often constrained by entrenched structural, political, and socio-cultural barriers. This scoping review explores how critical legal advocacy contributes to broader processes of social change by integrating community-based participation, cultural sensitivity, and data-informed strategies. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR protocol, a comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, HeinOnline, and Google Scholar using the keywords “critical legal advocacy,” “developing countries,” “social transformation,” “community-based,” and “data-driven.” Twelve peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 met the inclusion criteria. Data extraction covered advocacy contexts, methodological approaches, socio-political challenges, and transformative outcomes. The review identifies four persistent constraints—limited resources, political interference, institutional fragility, and socio-cultural resistance—while also mapping innovative practices such as paralegal empowerment, participatory legal education, strategic litigation, and cross-sectoral partnerships. Emerging evidence demonstrates a paradigm shift toward participatory and context-sensitive advocacy models across regions including Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Synthesizing these insights, this study proposes an integrated framework that situates critical legal advocacy as both a legal and socio-cultural process of transformation, providing practical guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to advance equitable and sustainable justice reform in developing societies.

Keywords: Critical Legal Advocacy, Social Transformation, Developing Countries, Community Participation, Data-Informed Justice, Legal Empowerment, Socio-Cultural Change.

INTRODUCTION

Access to justice remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, particularly for communities historically marginalized by political, economic, and legal systems (International Development Law Organization, 2021; UNDP, 2019; Open Society Foundations, 2018). Despite decades of institutional reform and governance initiatives, legal structures in much of the Global South continue to reproduce structural inequities, often privileging elite interests while excluding grassroots voices from meaningful participation (Golub, 2020; Ghai & Cottrell, 2018; Kabeer, 2016). In response to these systemic limitations, *Critical Legal Advocacy* (CLA) has emerged as a transformative framework that not only challenges the hierarchical and exclusionary nature of formal law but also empowers marginalized communities to claim their rights and influence policy change (Tate, 2021; Sabino, 2020; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that in developing contexts, law is deeply embedded in socio-political hierarchies and often functions as a tool of control rather than liberation (Ghai & Cottrell, 2018; Golub, 2018; Sriram & Goodale, 2017). Consequently, CLA extends beyond courtroom litigation to encompass strategies such as community mobilization, participatory legal education, paralegal training, and engagement with decision-making processes (Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020; Kabeer, 2016; Kabir & Ahmed, 2020). This broader, community-oriented conception of legal work reframes advocacy as a vehicle for social transformation rather than a purely legalistic pursuit (Tate, 2021; Batliwala, 2017; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019).

However, the practice of CLA in developing countries faces enduring barriers. Advocates and civil society organizations frequently operate in environments marked by political interference, limited funding, institutional fragility, and restricted civic space (UNDP, 2019; Idris, 2019; Golub, 2018). In fragile states, these challenges are compounded by weak rule of law and co-opted legal systems that reinforce existing power relations (Sriram & Goodale, 2017; Idris, 2019). Another critical obstacle lies in the disconnection between formal legal systems and local realities: many communities lack legal literacy, access to services, or familiarity with official procedures, which constrains their ability to engage meaningfully with the law (Open Society Foundations, 2018; ADB, 2021; Nguyen, 2022).

To address these limitations, community-based legal empowerment approaches have gained traction as alternative models for advancing justice from below (Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020; Kabeer, 2016; Kabir & Ahmed, 2020). These include paralegal initiatives, legal literacy programs, and participatory advocacy campaigns that foster local ownership and strengthen community agency (Ghai & Cottrell, 2018; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019; Zuniga & Romo, 2021). Empirical evidence from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America illustrates that such approaches not only enhance access to justice but also catalyze broader social transformation by challenging state-centric and elitist modes of legal practice (Kabir & Ahmed, 2020; Tate, 2021; Zuniga & Romo, 2021).

Yet, despite these developments, the literature remains fragmented. Most studies focus on specific geographic or thematic areas—such as gender justice, indigenous rights, or land tenure—without offering an integrated understanding of how CLA operates across diverse contexts (Rooney & van den Berg, 2019; Nguyen, 2022; Golub, 2018). There is thus a pressing need for a systematic synthesis of existing research to identify recurring challenges, innovative strategies, and contextual drivers of success in CLA implementation.

Against this background, the present study conducts a *scoping review* to map and analyze scholarly and practice-based literature on critical legal advocacy in developing contexts between 2015 and 2025, following the PRISMA-ScR protocol (Golub, 2020; Nguyen, 2022). Specifically, this study seeks to answer two key research questions:

- What are the principal challenges faced by critical legal advocates in developing countries? And
- What strategies have been documented to enhance the effectiveness of CLA in promoting social transformation and justice?

By synthesizing insights from cross-regional evidence and diverse disciplinary perspectives, this article aims to propose an *integrated framework* for critical legal advocacy that bridges theory, practice, and policy—offering a foundation for more inclusive, data-informed, and community-centered legal reform in developing countries.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in three interrelated domains: critical legal theory, legal empowerment, and social transformation frameworks. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of how legal advocacy can function as both a site of resistance and a mechanism for systemic change in developing contexts.

Critical legal theory offers the first conceptual pillar, emphasizing that law is not a neutral instrument but a reflection of existing power relations embedded within social, political, and economic hierarchies (Ghai & Cottrell, 2018; Golub, 2020). Scholars argue that in postcolonial and developing societies, legal systems often sustain rather than dismantle inequality by prioritizing formal legality over substantive justice (Sriram & Goodale, 2017; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020). Within this framework, *critical legal advocacy* (CLA) is conceptualized as a transformative practice aimed at contesting the ideological neutrality of law and expanding the boundaries of legal discourse to include marginalized voices (Tate, 2021; Kabeer, 2016). CLA thus aligns with the broader project of democratizing access to justice and promoting counter-hegemonic interpretations of rights and citizenship.

The second theoretical strand—legal empowerment theory—builds on the recognition that communities themselves are central agents in the pursuit of justice (Golub, 2010; UNDP, 2014). Legal empowerment posits that sustainable change arises when individuals and communities acquire the knowledge, skills, and institutional support to assert their rights (Open Society Foundations, 2018; IDLO, 2021). Within the CLA framework, empowerment is not limited to individual capacity-building but extends to collective mobilization, enabling communities to engage in participatory governance and influence legal outcomes (Kabeer, 2016; Kabir & Ahmed, 2020). This approach resonates with feminist and postcolonial perspectives that challenge top-down models of legal aid, advocating

instead for horizontal partnerships between legal actors and communities (Batliwala, 2017; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020).

The third dimension draws from social transformation theory, which situates law within broader socio-cultural and political processes (McCann, 2016; Sabino, 2020). From this perspective, legal change is meaningful only when it contributes to shifts in power relations, norms, and social consciousness. Social transformation frameworks highlight how community-based legal practices can generate ripple effects beyond the courtroom—shaping narratives of citizenship, accountability, and collective identity (Zuniga & Romo, 2021; Tate, 2021). By engaging communities in the co-production of justice, CLA not only addresses immediate legal grievances but also fosters long-term resilience and civic participation (Rooney & van den Berg, 2019; Nguyen, 2022).

Integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study proposes a new integrated framework for critical legal advocacy that links legal empowerment mechanisms with transformative social processes through participatory, data-informed, and context-sensitive approaches. This framework underscores three key principles:

- Inclusivity, where legal processes are co-designed with affected communities to ensure social legitimacy;
- Empirical grounding, where data-driven analysis informs advocacy strategies and policy interventions; and
- Transformative justice, where advocacy transcends procedural reforms to address structural inequalities.

In developing contexts, this integrated framework positions CLA as both a practical tool and a theoretical lens for understanding how marginalized populations can reclaim legal spaces, reshape institutional norms, and drive social transformation from the ground up.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed a scoping review design to systematically map and synthesize scholarly and practice-based literature on critical legal advocacy (CLA) within developing country contexts. The primary objective was to identify the recurring challenges, emerging strategies, and transformative mechanisms through which CLA contributes to social justice and empowerment. Given the conceptual diversity of CLA—spanning law, governance, sociology, and development studies—the scoping review approach was selected for its ability to accommodate interdisciplinary evidence and heterogeneous methodologies (Golub, 2020; UNDP, 2019).

The review followed the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, refined by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010), and aligned with the PRISMA-ScR protocol to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. This framework consists of five key stages: (1) identifying the research questions, (2) searching for relevant studies, (3) selecting eligible sources, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the review prioritized thematic depth, conceptual mapping, and contextual analysis, enabling the inclusion of both peer-reviewed and grey literature relevant to CLA, legal empowerment, and participatory justice reform (Golub, 2018; IDLO, 2021; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020).

This design choice reflects contemporary best practices for synthesizing knowledge in complex, socio-legal domains, where evidence may be distributed across diverse disciplines and institutional settings (Kabeer, 2016; Nguyen, 2022). The scoping review model was particularly suited to capture cross-cutting insights from studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, allowing for comparative reflection on context-specific challenges and policy innovations.

To ensure the review's analytical robustness, both qualitative and quantitative findings were considered. Qualitative studies were used to interpret narrative data on advocacy strategies, institutional dynamics, and community participation, while quantitative data—such as program outcomes, participation rates, or justice access indicators—were included to illustrate measurable patterns where available. This integrated analytical orientation aligns with the study's aim to develop a new framework for critical legal advocacy that connects theoretical inquiry with empirical and policy-relevant insights.

Ultimately, the study design enables a holistic understanding of how CLA operates as both a theoretical construct and a practical instrument of social transformation—bridging legal empowerment, participatory governance, and data-informed justice in developing contexts.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

To ensure comprehensive coverage and methodological transparency, this study employed a systematic and replicable search strategy consistent with the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses – Scoping Review) protocol. The search process was conducted between January and March 2025,

encompassing both peer-reviewed and grey literature related to *critical legal advocacy*, *legal empowerment*, *access to justice*, and *social transformation* in developing countries.

Electronic databases were selected for their relevance to law, social science, and development research, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, HeinOnline, and Google Scholar. To capture policy-oriented and practice-based evidence, supplementary searches were conducted on institutional repositories such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Development Law Organization (IDLO), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Open Society Foundations (OSF). Reference lists of key publications were also screened to identify additional eligible sources through citation chaining.

The search strings combined Boolean operators (AND/OR) and truncations to maximize retrieval precision and breadth. The final combination used was:

“critical legal advocacy” OR “legal empowerment” OR “community-based advocacy” OR “legal mobilization”) AND (“developing countries” OR “Global South” OR “low- and middle-income countries”) AND (“social transformation” OR “access to justice” OR “participatory governance” OR “data-driven advocacy”).

The inclusion criteria were established to ensure relevance, recency, and conceptual alignment with the study’s objectives. Studies were included if they:

1. Were published between 2015 and 2025,
2. Focused on critical legal advocacy, legal empowerment, or community-based justice initiatives in developing country contexts,
3. Provided empirical evidence, policy analysis, or conceptual frameworks addressing advocacy challenges or strategies, and
4. Were written in English and accessible in full text.

Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that:

1. Focused exclusively on criminal law or commercial law unrelated to advocacy,
2. Were editorials, commentaries, or news reports lacking analytical depth, and
3. Addressed high-income countries without reference to developing contexts.

All identified records were imported into Mendeley Reference Manager to facilitate de-duplication and screening. The screening process was conducted in two stages: (1) title and abstract screening to determine preliminary relevance, and (2) full-text review to assess eligibility against inclusion criteria. Two independent reviewers conducted the screening, with discrepancies resolved through consensus discussion to ensure objectivity and inter-coder reliability.

The search yielded a total of 312 records, from which 12 studies met the final inclusion criteria after full-text assessment. These studies represent diverse geographic regions—including Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—and a variety of advocacy forms, ranging from grassroots legal literacy campaigns to strategic litigation and data-informed justice initiatives.

This search strategy not only ensures methodological rigor but also aligns with the study’s aim to develop a comprehensive and context-sensitive synthesis of critical legal advocacy practices across the Global South. By integrating both scholarly and institutional evidence, the review contributes to building an empirically grounded theoretical framework for advancing social transformation through law in developing contexts.

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria were designed to ensure that the studies included in this scoping review directly aligned with the overarching aim of examining *critical legal advocacy (CLA)* as a mechanism for social transformation in developing contexts. To achieve conceptual coherence and methodological rigor, both inclusion and exclusion parameters were systematically defined in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR guidelines.

Inclusion criteria required that each study met the following conditions:

1. **Publication Period:** Studies published between January 2015 and March 2025 were included to capture the most recent developments in legal empowerment and advocacy practices within the past decade.
2. **Focus and Thematic Scope:** Articles had to examine *critical legal advocacy*, *legal empowerment*, or *community-based justice initiatives* that explicitly addressed the dynamics of marginalization, empowerment, or systemic reform in developing countries.
3. **Analytical Relevance:** Eligible studies were those that discussed either (a) the challenges and barriers faced by advocacy actors (e.g., institutional, political, socio-cultural, or financial constraints), or (b) the strategies and innovations employed to strengthen advocacy effectiveness (e.g., participatory legal education, data-informed approaches, community mobilization, or cross-sector collaboration).
4. **Methodological Diversity:** To ensure breadth and depth, the review accepted studies employing qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, or theoretical designs, including comparative analyses and case studies.

5. **Language and Accessibility:** Only studies written in English and available in full-text format were included to enable comprehensive assessment of methodological quality and findings.

Exclusion criteria were equally stringent to preserve the analytical focus and credibility of the synthesis. Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused exclusively on developed or high-income countries without reference to developing contexts or structural inequality;
2. Addressed legal topics unrelated to advocacy, such as criminal procedure, corporate law, or private contract law;
3. Were non-scholarly outputs, including editorials, opinion pieces, commentaries, conference abstracts, or unpublished dissertations;
4. Lacked sufficient methodological transparency or empirical grounding, such as anecdotal reports or descriptive summaries without clear analytical frameworks.

The inclusion of multiple study designs allowed for triangulation of evidence, integrating empirical findings, policy evaluations, and conceptual insights to form a comprehensive understanding of how CLA functions as a catalyst for justice and social transformation across regions. The final selection of sources ensured that all included studies offered substantive contributions to at least one of the review's guiding dimensions—vulnerability and structural barriers, strategic innovation in advocacy, participatory empowerment, or institutional reform (see Figure 1).

By applying these eligibility parameters, the review maintained both conceptual precision and contextual diversity, allowing for cross-regional comparison and synthesis of evidence from diverse socio-legal environments in the Global South.

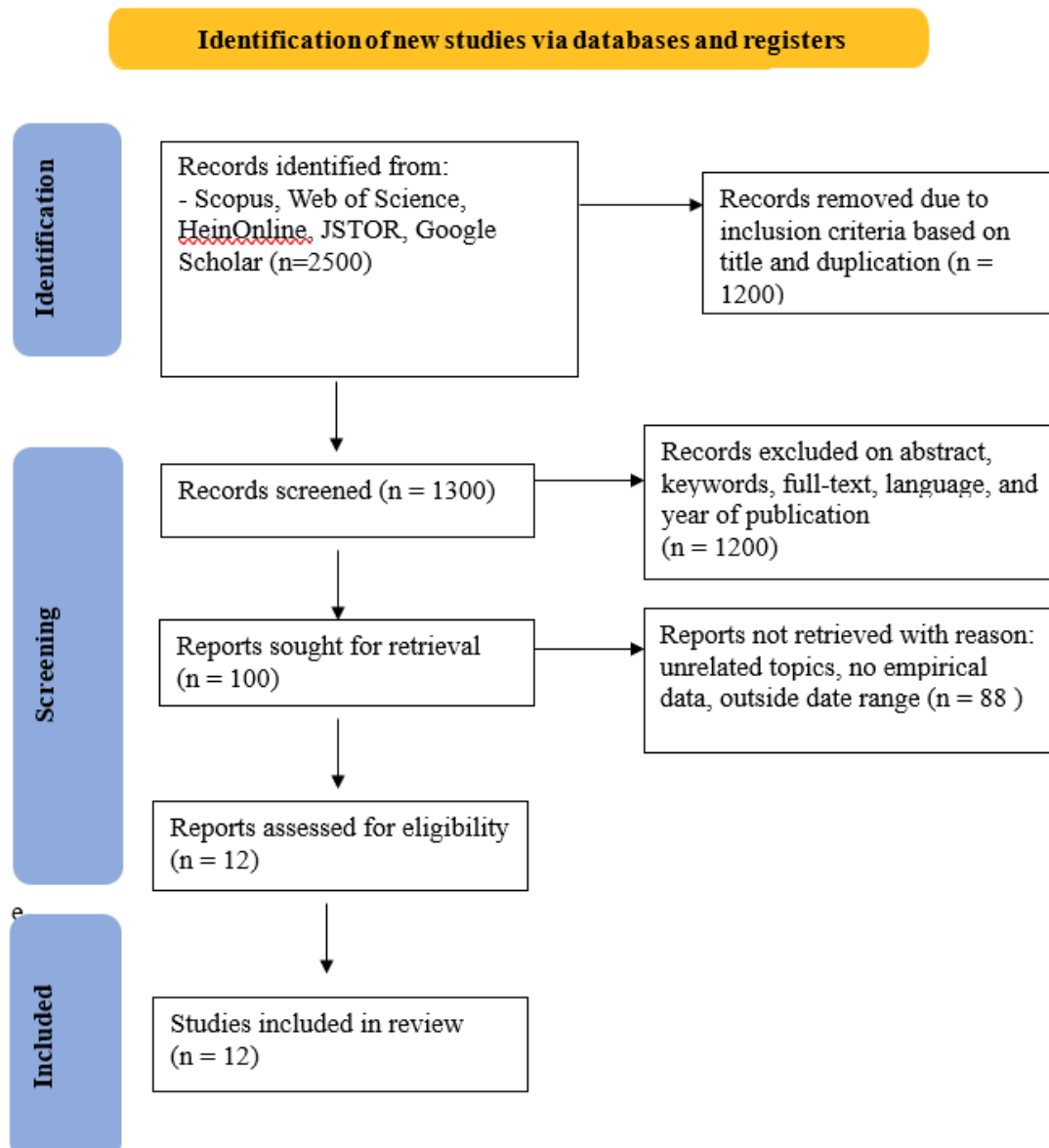


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Critical Appraisal

Although scoping reviews traditionally emphasize mapping rather than judging the quality of evidence, this study incorporated a critical appraisal process to enhance the credibility, transparency, and interpretive depth of the synthesis. Given the interdisciplinary and practice-oriented nature of *critical legal advocacy (CLA)* research, the inclusion of a structured appraisal step ensured that only studies demonstrating methodological robustness and conceptual alignment with the review's objectives were retained for analysis.

The appraisal process utilized a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, integrating criteria from both qualitative and quantitative assessment tools to accommodate the methodological diversity of included studies (Golub, 2020; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020). Each article was independently evaluated against four primary dimensions:

1. **Clarity of Aims and Conceptual Focus** – assessing whether the study articulated a clear research purpose related to legal advocacy, empowerment, or social transformation;
2. **Methodological Rigor** – evaluating the appropriateness of study design, sampling procedures, and analytical techniques in addressing the stated objectives;
3. **Transparency of Data Collection and Interpretation** – examining whether data sources, analytical frameworks, and evidence integration were explicitly described and justified; and
4. **Relevance and Transferability** – determining the extent to which findings contributed to understanding advocacy dynamics in developing or marginalized contexts, with potential applicability across regions.

To maintain analytical consistency, each study was rated using a three-tier evaluation system: *high quality* (meeting all criteria), *moderate quality* (minor methodological limitations but substantial conceptual relevance), and *low quality* (major flaws, insufficient data, or unclear methodology). Only studies rated as *high* or *moderate quality* were included in the final synthesis, while those lacking empirical substantiation or methodological transparency were excluded (see Table 1).

This critical appraisal served not merely as a procedural filter but as an interpretive exercise that informed the thematic synthesis. By assessing methodological robustness and contextual validity, the process strengthened the reliability of cross-study comparisons and the development of the Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy proposed in this article. It also ensured that the final corpus reflected a balanced representation of empirical, theoretical, and practice-based evidence across various socio-legal environments in the Global South.

Through this appraisal process, the review achieved a dual purpose: maintaining academic rigor in evidence selection and preserving the epistemic diversity necessary to capture the lived realities, political complexities, and transformative potential of critical legal advocacy in developing contexts.

Table 1. Critical Appraisal

No	Author(s), Year	Clear Aim/Objectives	Appropriate Methodology	Data Collection & Analysis	Notes / Comments
1	Kabeer (2016)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Strong qualitative approach
2	Golub (2018)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Literature review, comprehensive scope
3	Sriram & Goodale (2017)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Strong theoretical framework
4	Davis et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Good comparative qualitative methods
5	Rooney & van den Berg (2019)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Empirical study, good data triangulation
6	Kabir & Ahmed (2020)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Field research with rich data
7	McCann (2016)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Qualitative focus in post-conflict zones
8	Zuniga & Romo (2021)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Case study approach, culturally relevant
9	Batliwala (2017)	Yes	Yes	Theoretical analysis	High. Theoretical but strong feminist critique
10	Idris (2019) [24]	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Good empirical evidence on political risks
11	Chung & Choi (2018)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. Mixed methods strengthen findings

12	Nguyen (2022)	Yes	Yes	Adequate	High. analysis insights	Policy-focused with relevant
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Contextual Challenges and Strategic Responses

The reviewed studies collectively reveal that while resource constraints, political interference, and institutional weaknesses constitute recurring challenges for critical legal advocacy (CLA) across developing countries, the modes of manifestation and strategic responses vary considerably by region (Kabir & Ahmed, 2020; Idris, 2019; Nguyen, 2022; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019). These regional distinctions underscore the importance of adopting context-sensitive advocacy frameworks that reflect the sociopolitical realities, legal traditions, and power relations unique to each setting.

In Southeast Asia, most notably in Indonesia and the Philippines, CLA initiatives are often grounded in community-based legal empowerment and grassroots legal literacy programs designed to overcome socio-cultural barriers and low public awareness of rights (Zuniga & Romo, 2021; Kabir & Ahmed, 2020). These interventions emphasize participatory education, paralegal training, and data-informed advocacy, enabling marginalized groups to navigate formal legal systems with greater autonomy. Empirical findings from regional organizations, such as the Asian Development Bank (2021) and UNDP (2019), suggest that integrating digital legal tools and participatory mapping techniques has further enhanced the accessibility and legitimacy of such programs. This reflects a gradual shift from top-down aid-driven legal aid models to bottom-up participatory justice frameworks.

In contrast, Sub-Saharan African studies reveal the profound influence of political interference, weak governance, and institutional fragility on advocacy effectiveness (Idris, 2019; Golub, 2018). Advocates and civil society organizations often operate under restrictive political environments characterized by surveillance, limited funding, and threats to personal safety. As a result, they frequently employ protective and adaptive strategies, including coalition-building with international NGOs, strategic negotiation with state actors, and leveraging transnational networks to maintain operational resilience. These adaptive forms of advocacy reflect what Sriram and Goodale (2017) describe as “*pragmatic resistance*”—a balance between contesting state power and ensuring organizational survival in fragile political systems.

In Latin America, particularly in Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico, the literature highlights the centrality of strategic litigation and policy advocacy as transformative tools to challenge structural inequities embedded in the legal system (Tate, 2021; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019). Here, CLA operates not only through courts but also through public mobilization, media engagement, and cross-sector collaboration to push for institutional reform. These approaches are reinforced by robust civil society movements and the historical use of law as a site of resistance. Strategic litigation, when combined with grassroots activism, has been shown to generate judicial precedents and normative shifts that contribute to long-term social transformation and policy innovation (Nguyen, 2022).

Across all three regions, feminist legal perspectives emerge as a unifying analytical lens for addressing gendered dimensions of vulnerability and exclusion (Batliwala, 2017; McCann, 2016). Feminist CLA frameworks challenge patriarchal biases in legal institutions and advocate for inclusive participation of women in legal empowerment processes. These approaches often employ intersectional analyses—linking gender, class, and ethnicity—to design targeted empowerment programs, particularly for women in informal labour sectors or post-conflict communities.

Collectively, these regional findings illuminate the adaptive and pluralistic nature of critical legal advocacy. While the challenges are systemic—ranging from limited resources to authoritarian governance—the strategic diversity of CLA demonstrates its transformative potential. The evidence suggests that successful advocacy models are those that integrate contextual responsiveness, participatory engagement, and data-informed decision-making into their design. In doing so, they contribute not only to legal reform but also to the broader project of social transformation, aligning law with principles of justice, equity, and community agency (Kabeer, 2016; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020; Golub, 2020).

These insights form the empirical foundation for the Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy proposed in this study—a conceptual model that situates advocacy as a dynamic process operating across multiple scales: from grassroots empowerment and institutional negotiation to systemic reform and socio-cultural change.

Summary of Findings

The synthesis of reviewed studies reveals a consistent pattern of structural and contextual challenges confronting critical legal advocacy (CLA) initiatives in developing countries. Four dominant themes—resource scarcity, political interference, institutional fragility, and socio-cultural barriers—emerge as interrelated constraints that shape both the design and effectiveness of advocacy efforts (Kabeer, 2016; Kabir & Ahmed, 2020; Idris, 2019; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020). Among these, political pressures and weak governance systems are identified as the

most pervasive factors undermining the autonomy and continuity of advocacy programs. As Kabeer (2016) and Idris (2019) emphasize, fragile state structures and elite capture often distort the legal process, reducing civic space and restricting advocates' ability to challenge institutional injustice.

Equally significant are the financial and technical limitations that constrain program sustainability and innovation. Studies by Kabir and Ahmed (2020) and Golub (2018) indicate that many advocacy organizations, particularly community-based ones, operate with minimal funding and limited professional training, forcing them to rely heavily on volunteer networks and donor-driven project cycles. These constraints not only limit program reach but also impede the institutionalization of long-term reform strategies. Moreover, cultural and linguistic barriers—including low legal literacy, gender norms, and local distrust toward formal legal systems—further marginalize vulnerable populations and inhibit their active participation in justice processes (Batliwala, 2017; Zuniga & Romo, 2021).

In response to these systemic challenges, the reviewed literature identifies several adaptive and transformative strategies that demonstrate the potential of CLA to advance social justice and empowerment. Foremost among these are capacity-building initiatives, such as paralegal training, legal literacy campaigns, and participatory education, which strengthen local agency and enable communities to navigate legal systems independently (Golub, 2018; Sriram & Goodale, 2017). International and cross-sector collaborations are also found to enhance advocacy effectiveness by providing technical expertise, legal research support, and financial stability (Rooney & van den Berg, 2019; Nguyen, 2022).

In addition, feminist and intersectional approaches to CLA are increasingly recognized as vital to addressing the gendered dimensions of exclusion and discrimination (Batliwala, 2017; McCann, 2016). These frameworks challenge patriarchal power structures embedded within legal institutions and advocate for inclusive policy reform that amplifies women's voices in decision-making processes. Complementing these efforts, policy innovation and strategic litigation have emerged as key mechanisms for institutional transformation, linking grassroots mobilization to higher-level policy advocacy and judicial reform (Nguyen, 2022; Tate, 2021).

Collectively, these findings underscore that while CLA operates within constrained political and institutional environments, its transformative potential lies in its adaptability and capacity to link local empowerment with systemic change. Effective advocacy models are those that integrate community participation, cross-sector collaboration, gender inclusion, and data-informed decision-making. These multidimensional strategies not only expand access to justice but also contribute to the broader project of social transformation—redefining law as a participatory, emancipatory, and contextually grounded instrument of change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principal Findings

This scoping review identifies a complex constellation of systemic, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints that collectively shape the practice and impact of critical legal advocacy (CLA) across developing countries. The most recurrent challenges include chronic resource limitations, political interference, institutional fragility, and entrenched socio-cultural barriers—each interacting in ways that compound structural inequality and hinder sustainable legal reform (Golub, 2020; Idris, 2019; Kabeer, 2016). These interlocking factors create a multi-layered environment of constraint, in which advocates must continually negotiate between transformative ambition and survival imperatives within politically sensitive and resource-poor contexts.

Despite these obstacles, the review reveals that CLA achieves its greatest effectiveness when grounded in localized, context-sensitive, and participatory strategies, rather than through externally imposed or standardized legal models. Successful initiatives across the twelve reviewed studies integrated legal education, community organizing, participatory governance, and strategic litigation, aligning advocacy practices with the socio-political realities of their respective regions. In Southeast Asia, for instance, community-based legal empowerment programs—often anchored in paralegal networks and culturally attuned outreach mechanisms—have enhanced legal literacy, advanced gender equity, and enabled rural populations to assert land, labor, and citizenship rights (Kabir & Ahmed, 2020; Zuniga & Romo, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where political interference and fragile governance remain pervasive, advocates have adopted adaptive and protective strategies, including cross-border coalitions, discreet negotiation with state actors, and partnerships with international organizations to safeguard operations and sustain influence (Idris, 2019; Sriram & Goodale, 2017). In Latin America, strategic litigation has emerged as a transformative tool to challenge structural inequalities, utilizing human rights frameworks and coalition-based advocacy to secure landmark judicial reforms and influence national policy discourse (Tate, 2021; Batliwala, 2017).

A unifying thread across these regional contexts is the recognition of legal empowerment as both a tool and a transformative goal. Beyond facilitating access to justice, empowerment builds collective agency, social capital, and

civic resilience among marginalized groups (Golub, 2018; UNDP, 2019). The reviewed literature demonstrates that when communities actively participate in defining legal strategies, they shift from being recipients of advocacy to becoming co-producers of justice (Kabeer, 2016; Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020). This participatory transformation is reflected in initiatives that emphasize peer learning, local knowledge integration, and rights-based education, fostering long-term autonomy in navigating legal and bureaucratic systems (Zuniga & Romo, 2021; Open Society Foundations, 2018).

Furthermore, capacity-building and institutional support emerge as critical determinants of sustainability. Effective programs invest not only in legal and technical training but also in digital infrastructure, psychosocial support, and organizational resilience for practitioners working under threat (Nguyen, 2022; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019). International and transnational collaborations reinforce these efforts by providing financial stability, legal protection, and visibility for advocacy campaigns confronting authoritarian resistance or human rights violations (Golub, 2020; Nguyen, 2022).

Collectively, these findings underscore that critical legal advocacy must be understood as a multi-scalar and interdisciplinary process, operating simultaneously at grassroots, institutional, and policy levels. Its transformative potential lies not only in legal reform but also in reshaping power relations, amplifying marginalized voices, and reconfiguring legal culture toward inclusivity and accountability. When integrated with community mobilization, participatory governance, and strategic partnerships, CLA becomes a catalyst for enduring legal and social transformation—advancing justice not merely as a legal outcome but as an ongoing process of empowerment and collective agency within developing contexts.

Toward an Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy

The synthesis of findings from this review supports the development of an Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy (CLA) that links the micro-dynamics of community empowerment with the macro-structures of legal and policy reform. This framework conceptualizes CLA not simply as a professional practice or legal strategy, but as a multi-scalar, participatory, and transformative process that operates across four interrelated dimensions: structural barriers, strategic interventions, mediating mechanisms, and transformative outcomes. Through this integration, the framework provides a holistic model for understanding how advocacy can both navigate and transform the systemic inequities that define developing contexts.

The first dimension—structural barriers—captures the foundational constraints that inhibit equitable access to justice and limit the scope of legal reform. These include resource scarcity, political interference, institutional fragility, and socio-cultural exclusion, which collectively shape the environment in which advocates operate (Kabeer, 2016; Idris, 2019; Golub, 2020). Rather than treating these barriers as static obstacles, the framework situates them as dynamic contexts that influence strategy formulation and determine the capacity for social transformation. Recognizing this complexity underscores the need for context-specific advocacy approaches that are sensitive to historical legacies, governance structures, and power asymmetries in the Global South.

The second dimension—strategic interventions—encompasses the adaptive and innovative practices employed by advocates to navigate these constraints. Effective interventions are characterized by multi-pronged approaches, including community-based legal empowerment, strategic litigation, policy engagement, and cross-sector collaboration (Zuniga & Romo, 2021; Sriram & Goodale, 2017; Nguyen, 2022). Importantly, the framework emphasizes the integration of data-informed advocacy tools, such as participatory mapping, digital legal education, and evidence-based policy monitoring, to strengthen accountability and transparency. These interventions bridge the divide between grassroots mobilization and institutional reform, enabling advocacy to transcend traditional courtroom boundaries.

The third dimension—mediating mechanisms—explains how strategies translate into tangible empowerment and systemic change. Central to this process are capacity building, knowledge co-production, and community participation, which serve as catalysts linking legal action to social transformation (Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2020; Batliwala, 2017). The mediating role of collective agency is especially critical: by transforming beneficiaries into active legal actors, CLA reconfigures the social meaning of justice, shifting it from an institutional privilege to a participatory right. Moreover, through feminist and intersectional approaches, mediating mechanisms foster inclusivity by addressing the gendered and cultural dimensions of vulnerability, ensuring that advocacy is both equitable and contextually grounded (McCann, 2016; Kabeer, 2016).

The fourth dimension—transformative outcomes—captures the broader societal and institutional impacts of CLA. These outcomes extend beyond immediate legal victories to include structural, normative, and epistemic transformation—changes in how justice is conceptualized, practiced, and accessed within society (Golub, 2018; Tate, 2021). By embedding community participation and empirical evidence in advocacy, CLA contributes to the formation of resilient legal ecosystems, characterized by stronger civic engagement, enhanced institutional accountability, and redefined power relations between state and society. In this sense, legal advocacy becomes a form of social innovation, advancing both justice and governance reform.

Taken together, these four dimensions form a cyclical and iterative model, illustrating how critical legal advocacy functions as a transformative continuum—moving from identifying structural barriers, to designing adaptive strategies, to facilitating empowerment, and ultimately achieving systemic change. The Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy thus bridges theoretical discourse and practical application, providing scholars and practitioners with a conceptual map for analyzing and enhancing advocacy initiatives in developing contexts.

By situating CLA at the intersection of law, social transformation, and data-informed governance, this framework redefines the role of advocacy from reactive legal defense to proactive social reconstruction. It underscores that genuine justice reform in the Global South depends not merely on institutional change but on cultivating empowered communities capable of co-producing, contesting, and sustaining equitable legal systems.

Strengths and Limitations

This scoping review makes an important contribution to the study of critical legal advocacy (CLA) by systematically mapping contemporary research and identifying the intersections between legal empowerment, social transformation, and governance reform in developing contexts. Its primary strength lies in the rigorous methodological structure that follows the PRISMA-ScR framework, ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and conceptual coherence. The comprehensive search across multiple international databases—Scopus, Web of Science, HeinOnline, JSTOR, and Google Scholar—enabled a robust and interdisciplinary synthesis of literature from law, development studies, political science, and human rights research. The application of explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, coupled with a defined temporal range (2015–2025), ensured that the selected studies reflect the most current and relevant empirical and theoretical developments in the field.

Another key strength of this review is its analytical depth and thematic integration. Rather than merely cataloguing findings, the review synthesizes evidence through a comparative regional lens, revealing how advocacy strategies differ across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. By incorporating studies employing diverse research designs—qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, and theoretical—the review offers a multi-dimensional understanding of how CLA functions within different political, cultural, and institutional environments. This pluralistic approach enables a nuanced appreciation of the adaptive and transformative nature of legal advocacy, demonstrating how localized strategies contribute to broader frameworks of justice reform and social change. Additionally, the review's conceptual synthesis contributes to theory-building by informing the development of an Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy, which connects community-based participation with structural legal transformation.

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the limited number of included studies ($n = 12$) constrains the generalizability of the findings and may not capture the full diversity of CLA practices, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Central Africa, the Pacific Islands, and post-conflict states. Second, the language restriction to English-language publications may have excluded significant research produced in regional languages—such as Spanish, French, or Bahasa Indonesia—thus introducing a potential linguistic and geographical bias in evidence selection. Third, while the review incorporated a critical appraisal step adapted from CASP criteria, it did not perform a detailed meta-evaluation of methodological quality, consistent with the scoping nature of the study. This limits the ability to assess the relative robustness or causal strength of the evidence base.

Finally, the synthesis primarily relied on published academic and institutional literature, which may underrepresent the experiential knowledge and informal advocacy practices occurring within local communities and grassroots networks. Future studies could integrate field-based participatory research, case documentation, or mixed evidence synthesis to capture the lived dimensions of legal empowerment more fully. Nevertheless, by systematically consolidating fragmented scholarship and identifying patterns across regions, this review provides a foundational evidence base for advancing both theoretical and practical frameworks of critical legal advocacy and its role in driving social transformation in developing contexts.

Discussion and Recommendation

The findings of this scoping review affirm that critical legal advocacy (CLA) operates as both a practical strategy and a transformative framework for addressing systemic inequality in developing contexts. Across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, the reviewed studies collectively reveal that CLA's effectiveness is highly contingent upon the alignment between advocacy strategies and local socio-political realities. This confirms that legal empowerment cannot be reduced to procedural reform but must instead involve deep cultural and institutional engagement, enabling marginalized groups to shape the terms of justice themselves (Golub, 2018; Sriram & Goodale, 2017). Such an approach underscores that the law, far from being a neutral instrument, functions as a site of contestation where power is negotiated and redefined (Ghai & Cottrell, 2018).

A major implication emerging from the analysis is that successful advocacy depends on integrating top-down legal reform with bottom-up mobilization. In practice, this means combining strategic litigation with community-based legal education, participatory monitoring, and paralegal networks. As demonstrated in Southeast Asia, locally trained paralegals have served as mediators between formal institutions and informal justice systems, helping rural citizens assert rights related to land, labor, and gender (Kabir & Ahmed, 2020; Zuniga & Romo, 2021). Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, collaborations between local advocates and international organizations have provided essential resources and protection to activists working under political repression (Idris, 2019). These examples illustrate that contextual adaptability, alliance-building, and participatory engagement are key determinants of CLA's success.

However, the review also identifies enduring structural barriers that limit the transformative potential of advocacy. Political interference, bureaucratic inertia, and limited institutional capacity often undermine the independence and credibility of legal initiatives (Kabeer, 2016; Rooney & van den Berg, 2019). Moreover, socio-cultural hierarchies—particularly gender-based discrimination and linguistic exclusion—continue to constrain community participation in legal processes (Batiwala, 2017; McCann, 2016). To overcome these barriers, CLA must evolve from a reactive model that responds to injustice toward a proactive, integrated framework that embeds advocacy within long-term social development agendas. This involves incorporating data-driven decision-making, leveraging digital tools for legal literacy, and establishing feedback mechanisms that connect grassroots experiences with national policy processes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the proposed Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy emerging from this review positions CLA as a dynamic interaction between legal structures, social movements, and governance systems. The framework emphasizes three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Structural Empowerment** — reforming laws, institutions, and governance mechanisms to promote equity and accountability;
2. **Community Participation** — enhancing the agency of marginalized populations through education, organization, and co-production of justice; and
3. **Transformative Integration** — connecting localized advocacy efforts with broader movements for social and cultural change.

This framework highlights that advocacy effectiveness is relational: it depends on the interaction between local agency, institutional openness, and transnational solidarity. Therefore, future CLA initiatives must transcend disciplinary and sectoral boundaries, integrating legal practice with fields such as sociology, digital governance, and development planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesis of findings, several recommendations can be made for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers:

1. *Institutionalize Community-Based Legal Empowerment*

Governments and civil society organizations should formally integrate community paralegal programs and participatory legal education into national justice systems. Institutional recognition of these initiatives can bridge the gap between informal practices and formal law, enhancing both legitimacy and accessibility.

2. *Strengthen Transnational and Cross-Sector Collaboration*

Partnerships between local advocates, international NGOs, academic institutions, and donor agencies can expand access to technical expertise, funding, and legal protection. These collaborations also foster comparative learning and help replicate successful models across regions.

3. *Adopt Data-Driven and Technological Approaches*

Incorporating data analytics and digital platforms in advocacy can improve case tracking, evidence collection, and public awareness. Open-access databases of legal precedents and community cases can democratize information and enhance transparency.

4. *Promote Feminist and Intersectional Approaches*

Legal advocacy must explicitly address intersectional inequalities related to gender, class, ethnicity, and geography. Feminist legal empowerment frameworks provide inclusive methodologies that center the experiences of women and other marginalized identities in justice reform.

5. *Embed Advocacy in Broader Policy and Governance Reform*

CLA should not operate in isolation from national development and governance agendas. Embedding advocacy principles within policies on urban planning, land reform, labor rights, and digital governance can ensure that justice initiatives contribute to structural transformation rather than temporary relief.

6. Encourage Longitudinal and Comparative Research

Scholars should pursue longitudinal, mixed-method, and comparative research to assess the sustainability and transferability of advocacy models. Future studies could integrate field-based ethnography with quantitative impact assessment to deepen understanding of CLA's transformative outcomes.

In summary, this discussion underscores that critical legal advocacy is most transformative when conceived as an evolving process of empowerment rather than a discrete intervention. It must operate at the intersection of law, culture, and politics—mobilizing communities, reforming institutions, and reshaping narratives of justice. By advancing an integrated framework that combines empirical insights with participatory strategies, this study contributes not only to academic discourse but also to the practical realization of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable justice systems in developing countries.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that critical legal advocacy (CLA) represents a pivotal mechanism for advancing social transformation and justice reform in developing contexts, where legal systems often perpetuate structural inequities. Through a comprehensive scoping review of twelve studies conducted between 2015 and 2025, the findings reveal that while CLA holds transformative potential, its effectiveness is frequently constrained by resource scarcity, political interference, institutional fragility, and socio-cultural barriers. Despite these challenges, innovative advocacy models—rooted in community participation, data-driven governance, and intersectional justice—are reshaping how legal empowerment is conceptualized and practiced across the Global South.

At the theoretical level, this research contributes by articulating an Integrated Framework for Critical Legal Advocacy, positioning CLA as an interactive process that unites structural reform, community participation, and transformative integration. This framework underscores that sustainable legal change cannot be achieved solely through institutional reform or litigation; it must also engage the lived realities, knowledge systems, and agency of marginalized communities. The framework therefore bridges the divide between formal legal systems and grassroots mobilization, highlighting advocacy as both a *means* and an *end* in the pursuit of justice and equality.

Practically, the study demonstrates that the most effective CLA initiatives are those that align with local cultural contexts and power dynamics while maintaining strategic connections to global advocacy networks. Programs that integrate paralegal training, participatory legal education, feminist empowerment, and transnational partnerships consistently outperform those that rely solely on elite-driven litigation. Such integration not only enhances community resilience but also expands the moral and political legitimacy of advocacy movements. Importantly, this approach transforms law from an exclusive instrument of the state into a participatory space for democratic negotiation and collective agency.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this review generate several key policy implications that can inform justice sector reform, development planning, and civil society action in developing countries:

1. Mainstream Legal Empowerment into National Justice Systems

Governments should formally integrate community-based legal empowerment initiatives—such as paralegal networks, local legal clinics, and participatory dispute resolution mechanisms—into official justice frameworks. Institutionalizing these programs ensures sustainability, enhances accountability, and promotes inclusive access to justice.

2. Promote Participatory Governance and Legal Co-Production

Policymakers should adopt participatory models that enable communities to co-design legal interventions and monitor policy implementation. This participatory co-production enhances transparency and builds long-term civic trust in justice institutions.

3. Strengthen Protection and Support for Legal Advocates

National and international mechanisms must be developed to protect lawyers, paralegals, and human rights defenders working in politically sensitive contexts. This includes legal protection frameworks, psychosocial support, and emergency funding to ensure operational continuity.

4. *Integrate Digital Innovation and Data Transparency*

Ministries of justice and civil society organizations should leverage data analytics and digital platforms to map legal needs, monitor case outcomes, and track systemic inequities. Open data initiatives can foster accountability and enable evidence-based policymaking.

5. *Advance Feminist and Intersectional Legal Reforms*

Policymakers must embed intersectional approaches in justice policy—recognizing how gender, class, ethnicity, and geography interact to produce unequal access to rights. Legal frameworks that center women's leadership and Indigenous participation can catalyze broader social change.

6. *Encourage Cross-Regional Knowledge Exchange*

Regional networks across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America should be supported to share best practices and develop context-specific legal empowerment models. Comparative learning accelerates innovation and helps overcome isolation among grassroots advocates.

7. *Link Legal Advocacy to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

Particularly SDG 16 (*Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions*) should serve as an anchor for CLA-related programs. Integrating CLA into broader development frameworks ensures that justice reform contributes directly to poverty reduction, gender equality, and inclusive governance.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that critical legal advocacy is not merely a legal process, but a catalyst for social transformation. By repositioning advocacy within a participatory and data-informed paradigm, developing countries can move toward more inclusive and resilient systems of justice. The proposed integrated framework offers both scholars and practitioners a conceptual and operational guide for reimagining the relationship between law, power, and social change. Ultimately, achieving transformative justice requires not only reforming legal institutions, but also democratizing the very practice of advocacy itself—anchoring it in solidarity, empowerment, and shared human dignity.

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