

# Women's Access to Justice and Legal Aid: A Grassroots Study of District Legal Services Authority, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh

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## ABSTRACT:

This study explores how women in District Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, are using free legal aid services provided by the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). Through a questionnaire from 130 women who accessed these services, the research examines the types of legal problems they faced, how effective they found the help they received, and what challenges they experienced. Most of the women were aware of their legal rights and received timely assistance, especially in cases involving domestic violence, family disputes, and maintenance. While they were generally satisfied with the support, many found the legal procedures confusing and hard to follow. The study shows that while the DLSA is doing well in terms of outreach and case resolution, improvements are needed to make the process simpler and more user-friendly. These findings offer useful insights for improving access to justice for women in similar regions. This study underscores the potential of local legal service mechanisms in empowering women and bridging the justice gap at the grassroots level. It calls for strengthening infrastructure, improving follow-up support, and expanding community-based awareness programs to make legal aid more responsive and inclusive. The insights gained through this analysis can inform broader policy efforts aimed at enhancing access to justice for women in similar socio-cultural settings.

**Keywords:** District Legal Services Authority, Shimla, women's empowerment, legal aid, gender justice, access to justice.

## 1. Introduction:

Women's empowerment refers to equipping women with the agency, confidence, and opportunities necessary to exercise their rights fully and independently. It extends beyond

individual advancement and encompasses the transformation of societal structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Empowerment involves enabling women to make informed decisions, challenge discriminatory norms, and participate actively in

the social, economic, and political spheres of life. It is a multidimensional process that requires access to education, economic resources, healthcare, and justice. Empowerment is a process of change by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire this ability. Women's empowerment is enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 and is a critical component of the World Bank Gender Strategy 2024<sup>1</sup>. True empowerment extends beyond personal development; it involves a collective transformation of the societal frameworks legal, economic, cultural, and political that perpetuate gender inequality and exclusion. This includes challenging patriarchal norms, confronting gender-based violence, and ensuring that women's voices are heard in decision-making spaces. Empowerment enables women to make informed decisions about their bodies, livelihoods, education, relationships, and civic participation, thereby reclaiming spaces that have traditionally been dominated by male authority. As a multidimensional process, women's empowerment encompasses various interlinked domains: access to quality education, control over economic resources, availability of healthcare services (including reproductive and mental health), and unimpeded access to justice. Legal empowerment, in particular, is crucial in safeguarding women's rights and offering redress against discrimination and violence. It ensures that women are not only aware of their rights but are also equipped with the tools and institutional support to claim and enforce them.

At the heart of this empowerment lies access to justice, which serves both as a fundamental right and as a gateway to the realization and protection of other rights. Without the ability to seek and obtain a remedy through formal or informal institutions of justice, women remain vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and discrimination. Legal empowerment, therefore, is not just about legal literacy, it is about enabling women to navigate the legal system with confidence,

demand accountability, and secure redress for grievances. In contexts where legal systems are often complex, intimidating, or biased against marginalized groups, particularly women from rural, tribal, or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the provision of free legal aid becomes not merely a support service but a cornerstone of social justice. Legal aid facilitates meaningful participation in legal processes, helps women assert their rights, and breaks the cycle of dependency and disempowerment. It also plays a pivotal role in reshaping gender dynamics by challenging patriarchal practices within households and communities.

The role of legal aid in women's empowerment goes far beyond individual case resolution; it acts as a structural equalizer, enhancing women's confidence in the rule of law and strengthening democratic governance. Empowerment, in this sense, is both a goal and a process one in which access to justice is a necessary condition for women to live with dignity, freedom, and equality.

Despite progressive legal frameworks and gender-sensitive laws, deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to hinder women's ability to access justice. In both rural and urban contexts, a significant number of women remain unaware of their legal rights due to low levels of legal literacy, limited education, and cultural barriers that discourage them from seeking help. Moreover, the financial burden of legal proceedings often deters women from pursuing their claims, especially in cases where they are economically dependent on the very individuals against whom they are seeking redress. Thus, legal aid is indispensable to achieving gender justice. It reinforces the constitutional promise of equality and dignity, ensuring that the law becomes a lived and accessible reality for every woman, not just a theoretical guarantee.

In the Indian context, legal aid plays a pivotal role in actualising the principle of women's

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, "Women's & Girls' Empowerment," December 12, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/>

brief/womens-girls-empowerment (accessed August 7, 2026).

empowerment, particularly in the realm of gender justice. The Constitution of India enshrines equality before the law and guarantees protection against discrimination on the basis of sex (Articles 14 and 15), alongside the right to life and personal liberty (Article 21). However, for these rights to be meaningful in practice, especially for women facing systemic barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, social stigma, and patriarchal norms, free and accessible legal assistance is essential.

Legal aid functions as a bridge between constitutional ideals and lived realities, enabling women to assert their rights in matters of domestic violence, maintenance, inheritance, property disputes, workplace harassment, and more. Given the deeply entrenched gender inequalities in both rural and urban areas, many women remain unaware of their legal rights or unable to afford legal representation. Legal aid thus becomes a critical instrument of inclusion, ensuring that justice is not confined to those with social or economic privilege.

Institutions such as the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and the District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) have been instrumental in institutionalising this right by organizing awareness camps, deploying paralegal volunteers, and offering free legal representation to women in need. These mechanisms help dismantle barriers to justice and offer women a pathway to seek redress, safety, and autonomy within a legal framework.

Moreover, the gender-responsive delivery of legal aid does not merely address individual cases it contributes to larger systemic change by challenging discriminatory practices, promoting accountability, and encouraging the development of a more equitable and humane legal culture. In doing so, legal aid serves as a cornerstone of

gender justice, helping India progress toward a society where all women can live with dignity, security, and full participation in public life. Article 39A<sup>2</sup> directs the State to ensure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice on the basis of equal opportunity and to provide free legal aid through suitable legislation, schemes or other means, so that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen because of economic or other disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

This constitutional directive is operationalised through the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, which established a three-tier legal aid framework, including the District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) at the grassroots level. The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, was enacted by the Indian Parliament in the 38th year of the Republic but came into effect on 9th November 1995. Its origin traces back to a recommendation made in the 14th Report of the Law Commission of India. Although a legal aid scheme was initially introduced by the central government in 1960, it was later discontinued due to financial constraints. A renewed effort began in 1973, when the government established a committee led by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer to develop state-level legal aid frameworks. This decentralised initiative was further advanced by a committee under Justice P.N. Bhagwati, which proposed the creation of legal aid structures at the district, state, and national levels.<sup>4</sup>

The Act mandates that legal aid can be provided to a person for a case which includes a suit or any proceeding before a court.<sup>5</sup> Legal Services Authorities, upon determining that an applicant meets the eligibility criteria and has a prima facie case, provide legal representation at the State's expense. They cover the court fees and all related litigation costs. Once legal aid is granted, the beneficiary is not required to bear any expenses

<sup>2</sup> Constitution (Forty-Second Amendment) Act, 1976 (India).

<sup>3</sup> J. N. Pandey, *Constitutional Law of India* (45th ed., Central Law Agency, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Nourien Nizar, "Legal Services Authorities Act 1987—An Overview," *Legal 60*, September 14,

2021, <https://legal60.com/legal-services-authorities-act-1987-an-overview/> (accessed July 15, 2026).

<sup>5</sup> The Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, s 2(1)(a)

connected to the case. Each DLSA is chaired by the District Judge and comprises members nominated by the State Government in consultation with the Chief Justice of the High Court. These members must possess qualifications and experience as prescribed by the State Government. A full-time Secretary, a judicial officer of the rank of Civil Judge (Senior Division), is appointed to manage day-to-day operations and oversee the implementation of legal aid initiatives.<sup>6</sup> To fulfil its statutory mandate, the DLSA engages a range of human resources, including Panel Lawyers, Legal Aid Defence Counsels, Pro Bono Counsels and Experts, Para Legal Volunteers (PLVs), Mediators, Counsellors, and administrative staff.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, these stakeholders work to deliver free, competent, and inclusive legal services to the marginalized particularly women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and economically weaker sections—thereby bridging the justice gap at the local level.<sup>8</sup> While performing its duties under this Act, the District Authority should, where suitable, collaborate with government bodies, NGOs, universities, and other organizations involved in advancing legal services for the underprivileged. It must also follow any written instructions issued by the Central or State Legal Services Authority.<sup>9</sup>

However, while the legal framework appears robust, its actual implementation, particularly in rural and hilly districts like Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, raises important questions. Women in such regions often face multifaceted barriers social stigma, lack of awareness, economic dependency, and geographic inaccessibility which severely limit their ability to utilize available legal aid mechanisms. Despite the presence of the DLSA in Shimla, there remains a lack of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness,

accessibility, and effect of its services from a gendered perspective. Many women continue to be unaware of their legal rights or unable to navigate formal legal procedures due to deep-seated patriarchal structures, logistical difficulties, or lack of follow-up support.

The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 also provides for Permanent Lok Adalats under Chapter VIA for the settlement of disputes relating to public utility services. In addition, regular Lok Adalats provide an important alternative mechanism for the amicable settlement of eligible disputes.

Moreover, most existing research on access to justice in India focuses on national-level data or urban populations. Comparatively limited empirical research has examined how legal aid mechanisms operate at the district level, particularly from women's perspectives in geographically challenging regions. Therefore, there is an urgent need to examine how women interact with DLSA mechanisms in Shimla, what types of legal issues they seek help for, and whether the legal aid system effectively contributes to their empowerment.

Ensuring justice for women plays a critical role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Investment in women's access to justice not only furthers gender equality and empowerment but also contributes to long-term peace and inclusive societies. However, women continue to face systemic barriers including discriminatory laws, gender bias, and institutional shortcomings like corruption and impunity which hinder their ability to access justice effectively. These challenges are especially severe for women experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, or those affected by conflict and disaster.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, s 9.

<sup>7</sup> National Legal Services Authority, Manual for District Legal Services Authorities 2023 (2023), <https://nalsa.gov.in/manual-for-district-legal-services-authorities-2023/> (accessed July 15, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> The Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, s 12.

<sup>9</sup> The Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, s 11.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Programme, Toolkit: Women's Access to Justice (May 8, 2018),

India's legal aid framework is structured to deliver justice at the grassroots level. By leveraging decentralized bodies, community-based outreach, and statutory tools such as Lok Adalats and legal awareness programs, it seeks to close the justice gap for rural and marginalized communities.<sup>11</sup> There is an urgency to reinforce grassroots legal aid due to acute shortage of judicial personnel and infrastructure. As of 2023, the district judiciary often the first point of legal recourse for citizens faced a 21% shortfall, with 5,300 vacancies out of a sanctioned strength of 25,081 judges across both District and Civil Judge cadres.<sup>12</sup> This gap in judicial capacity highlights the importance of strengthening legal aid mechanisms to ensure timely, inclusive, and equitable justice delivery, particularly for women in rural and underserved regions.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

This study seeks to explore how legal aid services impact women's access to justice in District Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. Drawing on questionnaire responses from women who had accessed assistance through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), the research aims to understand both the strengths and limitations of the existing legal aid framework. The specific objectives guiding this inquiry are:

To assess women's awareness of legal rights and access to free legal aid services provided by the DLSA in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

To evaluate the effectiveness of DLSA in addressing women's legal needs, including the nature of disputes, timely resolution, follow-up, and overall user satisfaction.

To identify key barriers that hinder women's meaningful access to justice, and to suggest

policy-level interventions for improving gender-responsive legal aid delivery.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the gap between legal policy and the everyday realities of women seeking justice, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. By grounding its findings in the lived experiences of women in District Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, the study provides data-driven, context-specific insights that go beyond general statistics or policy rhetoric. These first-hand accounts reveal not only the legal issues women commonly face—such as domestic violence, property disputes, and financial insecurity but also the pathways they take to access justice and the barriers they encounter in the process.

Such insights are critical for informing evidence-based policy reforms that can strengthen the design and delivery of legal aid services across India. Policymakers, legal service authorities, and judicial institutions can use the findings to enhance outreach strategies, streamline procedural aspects, and build more accessible, user-friendly systems that truly respond to the needs of vulnerable populations. For example, the study's identification of informal community networks and digital platforms as key sources of legal awareness points to new directions for public legal education efforts. Moreover, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender justice and inclusive legal empowerment by highlighting how existing legal frameworks play out on the ground. It emphasizes the need to look beyond mere availability of services to focus on their accessibility, quality, and cultural relevance. The study provides lessons that may be relevant to similarly situated districts, particularly in the Himalayan and other geographically

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<https://www.undp.org/publications/toolkit-womens-access-justice> (accessed July 10, 2026).

<sup>11</sup> Sunil Chauhan, "Grassroots Legal Aid in India: Challenges and Lessons," paper presented at the ILAG 2025 Conference, 2025, ILAG 2025 Conference paper (accessed July 11, 2026).

<sup>12</sup> Centre for Research and Planning, Supreme Court of India, *State of the Judiciary: A Report on Infrastructure, Budgeting, Human Resources and ICT* (2023), Executive Summary, p. ix.

challenging regions of India. Finally, the study fills a significant gap in empirical literature on the performance of District Legal Services Authorities in real-world contexts, especially through a gender lens. By centring women's voices and experiences, it helps bring attention to both the progress achieved and the work that remains in ensuring that access to justice is not merely a constitutional promise, but a lived reality for all.

### 1.3 Literature Review

Access to justice is not only a constitutional right but also a critical component of women's empowerment and social equity. The existing literature highlights the structural and socio-cultural challenges that limit women's ability to access justice in India, despite the availability of legal frameworks intended to protect their rights. A growing body of scholarship has examined the effectiveness of legal aid mechanisms and their role in addressing gender-based vulnerabilities, yet few studies have focused on district-level empirical realities—particularly in rural or semi-urban settings such as Shimla.

A study by Prakash Kanive, Mahantesh G. S., and Mamatha Rangaswamy (2024)<sup>13</sup> provides a comprehensive review of how legal aid services function as a tool for bridging the justice gap for women in India. The authors underscore the layered barriers—economic, cultural, and institutional—that intersect and hinder women's effective use of legal systems. Their work highlights the importance of reforming the legal aid framework to respond to women's lived

experiences, especially those affected by caste, class, and geographic isolation.

Legal empowerment is closely tied to gender equality in law, as discussed by Pooja Rani and Sinshupa,<sup>14</sup> who examine key provisions related to marriage, divorce, domestic violence, and property rights. They argue that while progressive legislation exists, gaps in enforcement and persistent patriarchal attitudes weaken its impact. Similarly, Narain critically examines access to justice in India and the major challenges that prevent people from effectively using the legal system.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of Himachal Pradesh, a regionally relevant study on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)<sup>16</sup> sheds light on how grassroots actors support women's legal and social empowerment. NGOs have played a crucial role in raising awareness, delivering community-based support, and complementing the work of formal legal institutions like the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). This aligns with the work of Singh and Zahid,<sup>17</sup> who advocate for alternative justice mechanisms such as mediation and arbitration to reach marginalized populations more effectively.

The relationship between legal awareness and empowerment is further supported by a quantitative study conducted by Durga Naik, Reeya Dsilva, and Harshvi Sakdecha.<sup>18</sup> Surveying working women across sectors, their findings demonstrate a clear positive correlation between legal knowledge and women's agency, suggesting that enhanced legal literacy can significantly

<sup>13</sup> Prakash Kanive, Mahantesh G. S., & Mamatha Rangaswamy, "A Study of Women's Access to Justice Through Legal Aid Services in India," *Migration Letters*, 21(S3) (2024).

<sup>14</sup> Pooja Rani & Sinshupa, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Law in India," *Knowledgeable Research* (2023).

<sup>15</sup> R. Narain, *Access to Justice: A Critical Appraisal of Problems Faced in India*.

<sup>16</sup> Itika, "Contribution of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Empowerment of Women

in Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh: An Analysis," *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*.

<sup>17</sup> A. Singh & N. A. Zahid, *Strengthening Governance Through Access to Justice* (PHI Learning Private Limited, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Durga Naik, Reeya Dsilva, & Harshvi Sakdecha, "The Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Legal Awareness and Women Empowerment on Working Women," *Journal of Social Work and Welfare Research* (2022).

influence women's capacity to assert their rights. This theme is echoed in Mitras work which consists of a broader evaluations of legal aid implementation, and emphasizes the importance of strengthening service delivery for the most vulnerable.<sup>19</sup> Scholars such as Mamta Rao <sup>20</sup>and Justice A.S. Anand<sup>21</sup> have contributed to the discourse by examining the legislative and judicial dimensions of women's legal protection. Rao's work delves into constitutional, criminal, and personal laws affecting women, while Anand's writings and judgments bring to light the judiciary's role in advocating for gender justice. Complementary to these perspectives, Sehgal's commentary<sup>22</sup> on the Legal Services Authorities Act offers detailed insights into the statutory mechanisms that enable access to free legal aid at national and state levels.

Further, academic contributions such as *Access to Justice in India* and *Women and Law: From Impoverishment to Empowerment*<sup>23</sup> provide theoretical and historical contexts that inform the current discourse on legal empowerment. These works emphasize the need for a systemic transformation that includes not only legal remedies but also shifts in social and institutional attitudes toward women.

Collectively, the reviewed literature establishes that while India has a well-developed legal framework for ensuring access to justice, multiple challenges ranging from bureaucratic complexity and lack of follow-up to socio-cultural deterrents continue to hinder its practical realization, particularly for women. Despite growing attention to these issues at the national level,

there remains a significant gap in localized empirical research that evaluates how these dynamics play out at the grassroots. The present study contributes to this gap by examining the role and functioning of the DLSA in District Shimla, providing insights into how legal aid mechanisms are experienced by women in a real-world context.

#### 1.4

#### Methodology

The study adopts an empirical survey-based research design. Drawing on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to women who had accessed legal aid services through the DLSA. Respondents were selected from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and rural and urban locations. A study of this kind allows an in-depth understanding of user experience, institutional performance, and social dynamics affecting access to justice for women.

The study followed ethical research practices throughout its design and implementation. All respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their voluntary, informed consent before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and no identifying information was recorded or disclosed. The study also reviews secondary data on the functioning of legal aid mechanisms in the region. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the study captured women from diverse age groups, educational backgrounds, and both rural and urban locations within District Shimla. Participants were approached through available community networks and contacts familiar with

<sup>19</sup> S. Mitra & V. P. Anandapadmanabhan, "Challenges to Access to Justice and Free Legal Aid to the Marginalized: A Study of Constitutional Obligation in India," *Good Governance and Human Rights in Developing Nations*, 1(1), 190 (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Mamta Rao, *Law Relating to Women and Children* (4th ed., Eastern Book Company, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Justice A. S. Anand, *Justice for Women: Concerns and Expressions* (Universal Law Publishing, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> S. D. Sehgal, *Commentary on the Legal Services Authorities Act* (Universal Law Publishing Co., 2012).

<sup>23</sup> L. D. Parihar, *Women and Law: From Impoverishment to Empowerment* (Eastern Book Company, 2011).

legal aid activities. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent.

### 1.5 Results

This section presents the findings from structured questionnaire responses obtained from 130 women residing in District Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, who had accessed legal aid services through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). These responses provide valuable insights into the on-ground functioning of the legal aid system and its impact on women's access to justice. A significant portion of the respondents hailed from rural areas, affirming the DLSA's reach beyond urban confines and its efforts to extend services into remote or semi-urban localities. The remaining participants were from urban areas within the district. The age distribution of the participants revealed that the majority belonged to the 31–50 years age group—typically a stage where familial and social responsibilities intersect, often making women more vulnerable to legal and domestic issues. A smaller representation was seen among the 18–30 age group, while few participants were above 50, indicating that awareness and engagement with legal services span across age groups. Of the 130 respondents, 76 (58.5%) were from rural areas and 54 (41.5%) were from urban areas. The substantial representation of rural respondents indicates that the study captured experiences of women accessing legal aid beyond the urban setting. In terms of educational qualifications, a few women had no formal education, while others had completed primary or secondary schooling, and many had attained higher education. The respondents therefore represented diverse educational backgrounds, providing a broader understanding of women's experiences with legal aid services across different levels of education.

#### Awareness of Legal Aid Services: Sources and Channels

In response to the question regarding the source of awareness, word of mouth accounted for 26 per cent of responses, while the “other” category accounted for 28 per cent. The “other” category included sources such as ASHA workers and

front offices. Together, these sources accounted for more than half of the responses, showing the importance of local and personal networks in spreading information about legal services.

Social media accounted for 17 per cent of responses, making it an important source of legal awareness. This suggests that digital platforms can play a useful role in reaching women with information about legal rights and available legal aid services.

Television accounted for 10 per cent of responses, showing that traditional media still has some role in spreading awareness. In comparison, legal awareness camps accounted for only 8 per cent. This does not necessarily mean that such camps are ineffective, but it suggests a need to examine their frequency, reach, timing and methods of community participation.

Overall, the findings show that women often receive information about legal services through personal, local and digital sources.

#### Legal Awareness and Understanding of Rights

The findings show that most respondents were aware of the existence of the DLSA and had a basic understanding of their legal rights. However, awareness of specific legal aid channels like the free helpline, awareness camps was relatively lower. Many respondents learned about their rights and legal services through informal sources such as community discussions, NGO sessions and personal contacts rather than through formal education or institutional programmes. This highlights the need to provide simple and accessible legal information at the community level.

#### Nature of Legal Assistance Sought

Regarding the nature of legal assistance sought by respondents domestic violence emerged as the most common issue, accounting for 65 per cent of responses (84 out of 130). This was much higher than property disputes (8 per cent) and family disputes (2 per cent) while the remaining 25 per cent fell under other categories of legal issues. This finding highlights the need for Legal Services Authorities to have trained counsellors

and legal professionals who can effectively deal with cases of domestic violence. It also shows the importance of coordination with other support

services, such as One Stop Centres and the police.

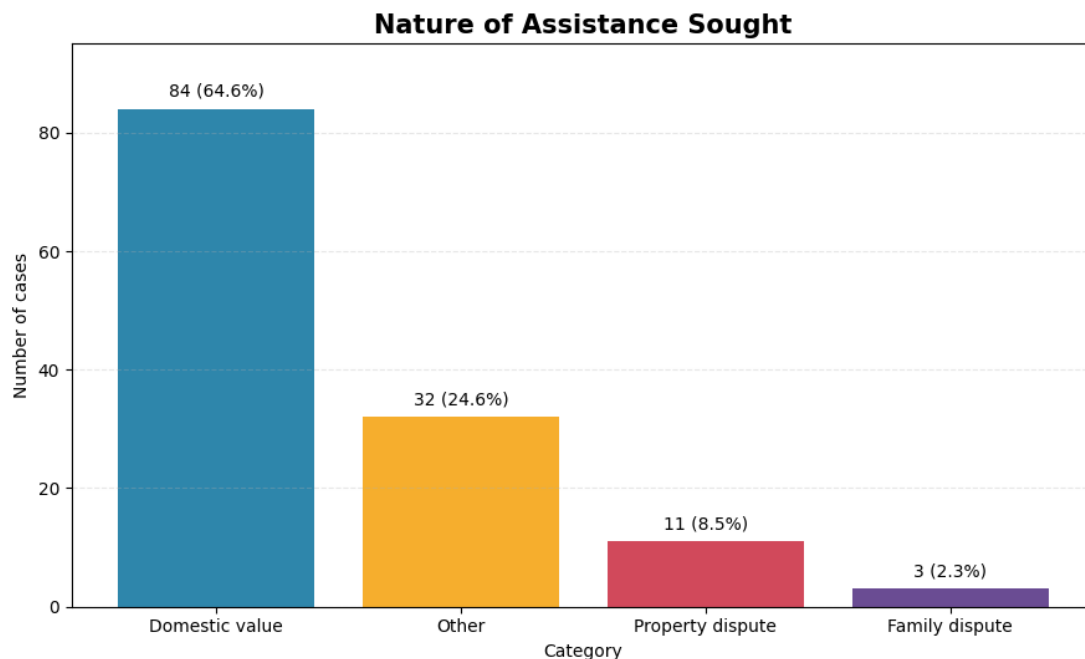


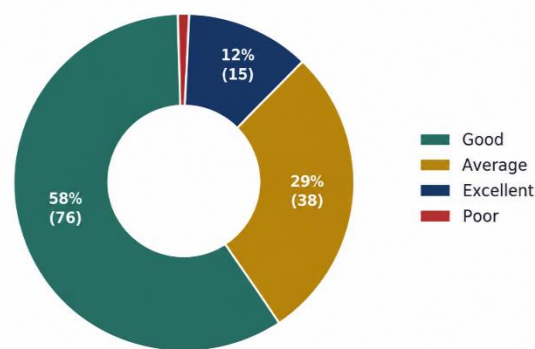
**Figure 1.1: Nature of assistance sought by the respondents.**

The high number of domestic violence cases indicates that legal aid institutions often serve as an important point of support for women facing violence and difficult personal circumstances. In such cases, a timely and sensitive response is important in helping women seek further legal remedies. Legal aid is therefore not limited to providing representation before courts. It also includes legal counselling, information about rights and available remedies, referrals to appropriate institutions, and assistance in understanding legal procedures.

At the same time, the lower number of family and property disputes does not mean that legal aid is less important in these matters. Such disputes can significantly affect women's financial security, residence, maintenance, inheritance rights, and family relationships. Therefore, Legal Services Authorities have an important role in addressing different types of legal problems faced by women, although domestic violence remains the most common reason for seeking legal assistance among the respondents in the present study.

### Service Delivery and Satisfaction

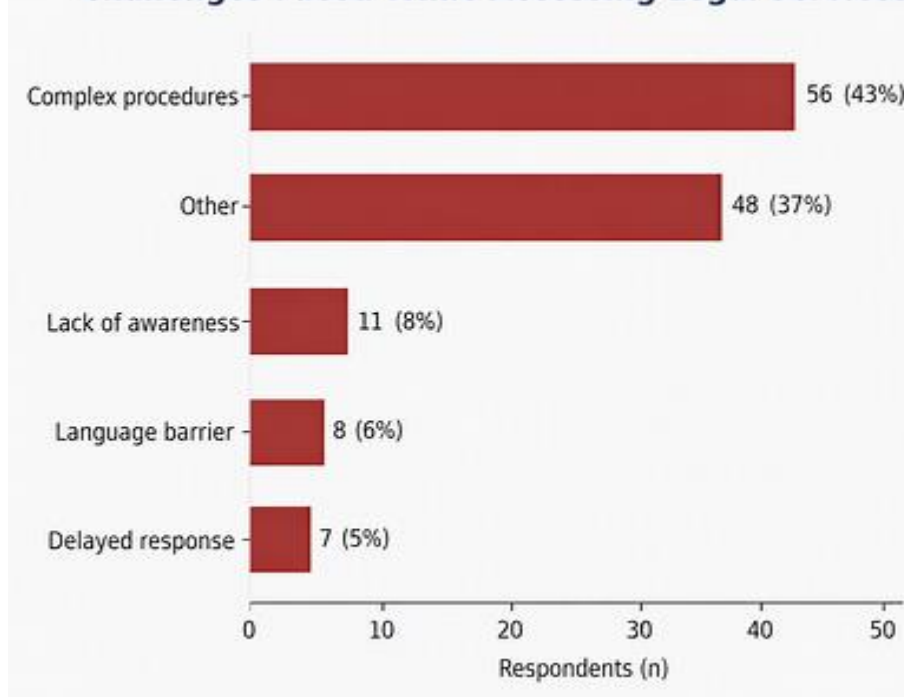
On the whole, the response to the DLSA's services was positive. Mostly women reported that their cases were registered and acted upon promptly. They also confirmed that there was consistent communication from the DLSA, both during the process. While respondents generally reported positive communication during the legal aid process, post-resolution follow-up was less consistently reported. When asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction, the women rated the experience as excellent, good or average. The overall assessment of LSA effectiveness was largely positive. As shown in the Figure, 58 per cent of respondents (76) rated the services as good, while 12 per cent (15) rated them as excellent. Thus, 70 per cent of respondents gave a positive rating of good or excellent. A further 29 per cent (38) rated the services as average, while only 1 per cent (1) rated them as poor. These findings indicate a generally favourable perception of the effectiveness of legal aid services among the women respondents, although the relatively large proportion reporting an average experience suggests scope for further improvement in service delivery.

**Overall Rating of LSA Effectiveness****Figure 1.2: Overall Rating of LSA Effectiveness****Challenges Faced:**

Despite respondents generally positive experience, some challenges were identified in accessing legal services. As shown in Figure complex procedures were the most commonly reported challenge, identified by 43 per cent of respondents (56 out of 130). This was significantly higher than other specific challenges, such as delayed response (5 per cent). A considerable number of respondents (37 per cent, or 48 out of 130) selected the “other” category. Since the questionnaire did not specify these difficulties, they may include issues such as

distance, travel expenses, documentation requirements, or other personal and practical problems. Lack of awareness (8 per cent) and language barriers (6 per cent) were reported less frequently.

This finding is interesting because, as discussed in the figure awareness of specific services such as the legal aid helpline and legal awareness camps was relatively low. However, respondents may not consider a lack of knowledge about these particular services as a direct barrier, even though limited awareness can reduce the different options available for accessing legal assistance.

**Challenges Faced While Accessing Legal Services****Figure 1.3: Challenges Faced While Accessing Legal Services.**

Overall, the findings indicate that the DLSA in Shimla is playing an important role in providing legal assistance to women who access its services. Respondents generally reported positive experiences regarding service delivery and communication. However, procedural complexity, gaps in awareness of specific access channels, and inconsistent follow-up indicate areas requiring further improvement. This study, while based on a structured responses, from 130 women beneficiaries, provides valuable evidence of how legal aid is accessed, experienced, and evaluated by women in semi-urban and rural India. It affirms that grassroots legal institutions like the DLSA can be transformative—but only if supported by continued efforts to reduce procedural, linguistic, and cultural barriers.

### 1.6 Discussion

This study uses a feminist jurisprudential perspective to examine how women experience legal aid services in District Shimla. Feminist jurisprudence highlights that legal systems can sometimes reflect existing social and gender inequalities. It therefore emphasizes the importance of understanding women's experiences and ensuring that legal institutions respond to their specific needs. From this perspective, the findings provide useful insights into how women access and use legal aid in a rural and semi-urban setting.

The findings show that the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Shimla plays an important role in helping women access justice. The respondents generally reported positive experiences with the services provided. The findings show that women came to know about legal aid through different sources, including personal contacts, awareness programmes, social media, and other community-based channels. This indicates the importance of using both formal and informal methods to spread awareness about legal rights and legal aid services.

The nature of legal problems reported by the respondents also reflects the gendered nature of women's legal needs. Domestic violence was the most common reason for seeking legal assistance, while the remaining respondents reported

property disputes, family disputes, and other legal issues. These findings show that legal aid institutions are often an important source of support for women facing violence, family disputes, maintenance issues, and other problems affecting their safety and rights. Legal aid in such cases is not limited to court representation. Legal counselling, information, referrals, and assistance in understanding legal procedures are also important parts of the support provided.

An important finding of the study is the coexistence of positive satisfaction levels and procedural difficulties. Although most respondents viewed the services positively and reported that their matters were handled in a timely manner, procedural complexity remained a major challenge. This suggests that positive experiences with legal aid do not necessarily mean that the wider legal process is easy to understand or navigate. Women may receive useful assistance from the DLSA while still finding legal procedures difficult, particularly when they are using the system for the first time. Simplifying procedures and using plain and understandable language could therefore make legal aid more accessible.

The findings also highlight the importance of continued follow-up and communication. While respondents generally expressed satisfaction with the assistance received, follow-up after the initial service was not equally consistent in all cases. A more structured system of communication and feedback could help women remain informed about the progress of their matters and could also improve institutional accountability.

The study therefore suggests that legal empowerment should not be understood only in terms of awareness of rights or the availability of free legal services. Women also need practical support to understand procedures, communicate with legal institutions, and pursue remedies. In this sense, accessible legal aid can contribute to women's legal empowerment by increasing their ability to understand and exercise their rights.

The findings broadly address the objectives of the study. The research examined women's awareness of legal aid, identified the main types

of legal problems for which assistance was sought, assessed women's experiences and satisfaction with DLSA services, and identified the main barriers to access. The results indicate that the DLSA is providing an important service to women who approach it, but procedural complexity remains an important area for improvement. The findings also support the need for stronger community-level legal awareness, accessible guidance, effective follow-up, and gender-sensitive service delivery.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the formal availability of legal aid is important, but it is not sufficient by itself. Access to justice must also be understandable, accessible, responsive, and sensitive to women's circumstances. From a feminist jurisprudential perspective, legal aid should therefore focus not only on providing legal assistance but also on ensuring that women can use the justice system with dignity, confidence, and greater agency. The experience of DLSA Shimla shows both the value of grassroots legal aid and the need for continued efforts to make the legal process simpler and more accessible.

### 1.7 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions aim to enhance the overall effectiveness, inclusivity, and accessibility of legal aid services for women in District Shimla and comparable regions. These recommendations are rooted in the lived experiences of the respondents and reflect both their positive encounters with the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) and the procedural or structural challenges they faced. By addressing identified gaps particularly in outreach, procedural simplicity, and user experience these suggestions seek to guide targeted improvements in legal aid delivery.

#### Simplify Legal Procedures

Efforts should be made to streamline and simplify the procedural requirements involved in accessing legal aid services. Many women—especially those from marginalized or rural backgrounds find the legal process intimidating, confusing, and inaccessible due to the use of

technical language and complex paperwork. To make legal aid more user-friendly and inclusive, application forms, notices, summons, and informational materials should be designed using plain language that is easy to understand for individuals with minimal legal literacy. This includes avoiding legal jargon, using visuals or illustrations where possible, and providing instructions in a step-by-step format. Moreover, the initial contact process—whether through in-person visits, online applications, or helplines—should be designed to reduce procedural burden. For example, legal aid desks or help counters at court premises and community centres can assist women in filling out forms or understanding the required documents. Simplification should also extend to follow-up communication, where case updates and notices are often issued in complex formats. Ultimately, making the process more navigable for first-time users—especially vulnerable women—will remove procedural barriers, enhance trust in legal institutions, and significantly increase the actual reach of free legal aid services.

#### Expand Legal Literacy Initiatives

Legal literacy is a foundational step toward empowering women to assert their rights and seek justice. Without a basic understanding of their legal entitlements and the mechanisms available for redressal, many women remain unaware that free legal aid even exists, let alone how to access it. Therefore, expanding legal literacy initiatives is crucial for bridging the gap between legal awareness and legal empowerment. Targeted awareness campaigns are needed to reach women from remote villages, marginalized communities, and older age groups. Collaborations with Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers, schools, and local governance institutions could enhance outreach. District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs), in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and local self-governments (Panchayati Raj Institutions), should organize regular legal awareness camps tailored to the specific issues faced by women in the region—such as domestic violence, dowry harassment, property disputes, workplace

harassment, and maintenance rights. Legal literacy must be seen not as a one-time event but as a continuous, community-based process that fosters informed decision-making, confidence, and self-reliance among women in asserting their rights.

### **Introduce Legal Navigators or Paralegal Support**

For many women, especially those facing poverty, domestic violence, social stigma, or low literacy levels the legal system can appear overwhelming, bureaucratic, and alienating. To make justice more accessible, there is a pressing need to institutionalize the role of Legal Navigators or strengthen Paralegal Volunteer (PLV) support at the community level. Legal Navigators, also known as community legal workers or trained paralegals—are non-lawyer personnel trained to guide individuals through the legal process. Their primary role is to assist women in understanding their rights, filling out legal forms, preparing basic documentation, and connecting them with appropriate legal aid services or DLSA lawyers. These navigators act as a bridge between the community and the formal legal system, helping women overcome the procedural, emotional, and logistical barriers that often deter them from seeking justice.

In the Indian context, the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 already provides for the engagement of Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs) under NALSA and DLSA frameworks. However, their presence and impact are often inconsistent, especially in rural and remote areas. By embedding these navigators or trained paralegals in the community, women will have trusted, accessible allies who can walk them through the legal maze, reduce their dependence on exploitative intermediaries, and instil confidence to claim justice as a right not as a privilege.

### **Strengthen Gender Sensitivity Training**

A critical barrier to women's access to justice is the lack of gender-sensitive attitudes within the legal system. Women approaching justice institutions may encounter gender-insensitive attitudes or a lack of empathetic support, particularly in sensitive cases involving domestic

violence, sexual harassment, or matrimonial disputes. This deters many from pursuing justice or returning for assistance. To address this, there is a strong need to strengthen and institutionalise gender sensitivity training for all personnel involved in the delivery of legal aid and justice services. All panel lawyers and legal aid staff should undergo regular training on gender sensitivity, respectful communication, and trauma-informed support. This would improve the overall user experience for women approaching the DLSA.

### **Establish Feedback and Follow-Up Systems**

While access to legal aid is the first step, the effectiveness of such services ultimately depends on the quality, continuity, and accountability of support provided. In many cases, women receive initial legal advice or assistance, but there is no structured follow-up to ensure their case progresses, that they remain informed, or that their concerns are addressed. To close this gap, it is essential to institutionalise feedback and follow-up mechanisms within the functioning of District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs). A structured feedback mechanism should be introduced to gather responses from women after their cases are closed. Regular follow-up can improve accountability and ensure that beneficiaries feel supported throughout the process. When women know they are being heard and supported throughout their legal journey, legal aid becomes a sustained process of justice, rather than a one-time transaction.

### **Digitally Enabled Legal Services**

In an era of increasing digital connectivity, technology offers immense potential to expand the reach, efficiency, and inclusivity of legal aid services especially for women living in geographically remote or socially marginalized communities such as those in District Shimla. By leveraging digital tools thoughtfully and inclusively, legal aid systems can become more accessible, transparent, and user-centric. By leveraging digital kiosks and virtual helpdesks at the panchayat level, such initiatives effectively complement traditional in-person legal aid services, bridging the gap between marginalized

communities and legal support mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> By integrating technology into legal aid services, authorities can reduce distance, save time and cost, and ensure timely access to justice for women. However, the digital transformation must be inclusive, participatory, and sensitive to the realities of women who are often left out of the digital revolution. When done right, digitally enabled legal services can become a powerful tool for closing the justice gap and deepening women's legal empowerment.

### **Leverage Academic Institutions for Community-Based Legal Aid**

Law universities and academic institutions can play a vital complementary role in expanding access to justice, particularly in underserved rural areas. Legal aid clinics in law colleges across India serve as platforms for spreading legal awareness and providing primary legal assistance.<sup>25</sup> A notable example is the Legal Aid Clinic of Himachal Pradesh National Law University (HPNLU), Shimla. Community outreach initiatives conducted by HPNLU, including awareness programs on child rights, free health check-ups, and the adoption of village panchayats for providing free legal aid,<sup>26</sup> reflect the university's commitment to promoting grassroots legal empowerment. These efforts, actively supported by law students, faculty, and legal researchers, strengthen public engagement and foster legal awareness in underserved areas. To ensure sustainable impact, such academic legal aid initiatives should be institutionally supported and formally integrated into broader access to justice strategies.

Together, these suggestions aim to bridge the gap between the formal availability of legal aid and its

practical usability by women, especially those in vulnerable and marginalized situations. By simplifying procedures, strengthening community-based support, enhancing gender sensitivity, and expanding outreach, legal services authorities can move closer to fulfilling their mandate of ensuring equal and meaningful access to justice. The experiences documented in District Shimla reflect both the potential and limitations of the current system, offering valuable lessons that can inform more inclusive, responsive, and empowering legal aid delivery across similar regions in India.

### **1.8 Conclusion**

This study examined the role and effectiveness of the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) in Shimla in advancing women's access to justice and contributing to their legal empowerment. By drawing on the data from questionnaire obtained from these women beneficiaries, the research achieved its key objectives identifying the most prevalent legal issues women face, gauging levels of awareness, assessing the effectiveness of legal aid services, and uncovering the procedural and institutional barriers that impede access.

Findings reveal that the DLSA in Shimla performs a responsive and timely role in assisting women who manage to reach its doors. The support provided whether in the form of legal counselling, representation, or alternative dispute resolution was largely appreciated by the respondents. However, the study also makes it clear that legal processes remain overly complex, especially for first-time users, women with low literacy, or those from vulnerable social groups. This complexity, combined with limited legal literacy and socio-cultural hesitation, continues to

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, "Tele-Law Programme," Press Information Bureau, June 23, 2022, <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specifcdocs/documents/2022/jun/doc202262367301.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Santosh Snehi Mann & Sunil Chauhan, Access to Justice in India: A Report (India National Report, ILAG Conference, May 2023), India

National Report—ILAG Conference 2023 (accessed July 8, 2026).

<sup>26</sup> Himachal Tonite, "Legal Aid Clinic, HPNLU Conducts Outreach Program in Rural Wards of Shimla," July 14, 2025, <https://himachaltonite.com/himachal/legal-aid-clinic-hpnlu-conducts-outreach-program-in-rural-wards-of-shimla/> (accessed July 14, 2025).

hinder full utilization of legal aid services. Importantly, the Shimla experience reinforces the crucial role that localized, grassroots legal aid mechanisms can play in women's empowerment, especially when those mechanisms are well-coordinated, gender-sensitive, and embedded within the community. Although the study is geographically confined to District Shimla and uses a sample consisting of structured responses from 130 women beneficiaries, it provides a focused account of women's experiences with legal aid services. These findings highlight a dual reality: while structural frameworks like the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 are functioning and institutional efforts are expanding, the user experience still needs considerable improvement. Women need not just access to legal aid, but access that is navigable, comprehensible, safe, and empowering.

As India strengthens its legal aid agenda, studies of this nature provide significant insights. This makes user-centred studies such as this one indispensable. They reveal the operational gaps, human challenges, and context-specific needs that macro-level data often overlooks. The Shimla case, while unique in its hilly geography and semi-urban demography, offers a replicable model for other similarly situated districts across

India especially those where women face layered exclusions due to geographical isolation, patriarchal norms, limited education, and weak infrastructure.

Achieving the constitutional promise of justice for all requires not only the availability of legal aid but also its accessibility, reliability, and responsiveness to the lived realities of women. Grounded, empathetic, and community-focused legal aid delivery can transform justice from an abstract ideal into a lived, empowering experience, particularly for women who have historically been left at the margins of the legal system.

Strengthening women's capacity to seek justice through appropriate legal channels and translating constitutional guarantees into meaningful realities are essential to achieving substantive equality and empowerment. Effective access to justice not only enables women to challenge injustice and assert their rights but also contributes to the creation of a more equitable, inclusive, and just society. True empowerment lies not merely in the recognition of rights, but in ensuring that women possess the awareness, confidence, and institutional support necessary to exercise them.

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