



## Legal Aid: A Cornerstone of Human Rights in Pakistan

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: August 18, 2023  
Revised: October 18, 2023  
Accepted: October 19, 2023  
Available Online: October 20, 2023

#### Keywords:

Pakistan  
Legal System  
Legal Aid  
Human Rights  
Access To Justice

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between legal aid and human rights in Pakistan, addressing the challenges faced by marginalized communities in accessing justice and the impact of legal aid in overcoming these barriers. It also highlights key policy implications, acknowledging limitations and emphasizing the need for robust government support to ensure equitable access to justice. Legal aid is portrayed as a lifeline for individuals facing human rights violations and injustices, to strengthen Pakistan's legal aid framework to promote justice and equity. This article offers valuable insights into these critical issues and provides a roadmap for improving access to justice and safeguarding human rights in Pakistan.

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.



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Citation: Islam, M., Jubeen, S., & Tayyaba, U. (2023). Legal Aid: A Cornerstone of Human Rights in Pakistan. *Current Trends in Law and Society*, 3(1), 50-57.  
<https://doi.org/10.52131/ctls.2023.0301.0015>

## 1. Introduction

Pakistan, a nation steeped in a rich history, a tapestry of cultures, and a complex sociopolitical terrain, possesses a legal system deeply rooted in its colonial heritage and influenced by Islamic law. Within Pakistan's legal framework, a delicate fusion of English common law, civil law, and Sharia law emerges, resulting in an intricate legal landscape that is often daunting to navigate. This intricate legal system is not just a matter of historical curiosity; it holds a vital role in safeguarding individual rights and ensuring justice. Access to justice stands as the cornerstone upon which a just and equitable society is constructed. It forms the bedrock of democracy and human rights, for it is through this access that individuals can defend their freedoms, safety, and fundamental rights. In a country with a population exceeding 220 million, countless individuals find themselves embroiled in legal battles that hold the power to determine their fate. Sadly, the hurdle of financial constraints frequently obstructs these individuals from securing legal representation, rendering them vulnerable to miscarriages of justice (Rafiq, Baig, Rana, & Safdar, 2022).

This is where the profound importance of legal aid becomes unmistakably evident. Legal aid programs, whether initiated by the government or facilitated by non-governmental organizations, offer indispensable support to those who lack the financial means to access legal services. Legal aid functions as the bridge between marginalized individuals and the legal system, ensuring that every person, regardless of their economic standing, possesses the opportunity to seek justice, defend their rights, and access the courts. It is a pivotal mechanism that levels the playing field in a society characterized by stark disparities in wealth and power.

The primary objective of this article is to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between legal aid and human rights in Pakistan. It is incumbent upon us to analyze the challenges and barriers that marginalized communities encounter when attempting to access justice and to delineate the profound impact of legal aid in surmounting these obstacles. This shall address the question: *How do legal aid services contribute to the protection of human rights in Pakistan, particularly for marginalized communities facing barriers to accessing justice?*

This article will delve into the international standards and principles that underscore the critical role of legal aid in ensuring a fair trial and safeguarding human rights. Moreover, the article will scrutinize the existing legal aid services available in Pakistan, encompassing both government-driven initiatives and the endeavours of non-governmental organizations. Notably, it will illuminate the pivotal role of legal aid in specific human rights cases, thereby illustrating its potential to prevent wrongful convictions and avert miscarriages of justice. Furthermore, this article will present compelling statistics and concrete evidence that attest to the positive and transformative influence of legal aid, underscoring its profound role in safeguarding human rights. It will emphatically emphasize the indispensable need for unwavering government support and commitment to enhance legal aid services, thereby ensuring broader and more equitable access to justice for all.

In conclusion, this article steadfastly underscores that legal aid is far more than a mere service; it is a lifeline for individuals grappling with human rights violations and injustices. Legal aid serves as the instrument that empowers the marginalized, shields against wrongful convictions and stands as an essential guardian of human rights. The overarching aspiration is to highlight the critical importance of fortifying Pakistan's legal aid framework, upholding international human rights standards, and positioning Pakistan as a beacon of justice and equity for all its citizens.

## **2. Literature Review**

Past studies have recognized the critical importance of legal aid in ensuring access to justice, particularly for vulnerable populations (Beqiraj & McNamara, 2014). However, within the context of Pakistan, there exists a significant research gap regarding the specific impact of legal aid on human rights protection. While previous work has explored the broader scope of legal aid services and access to justice in Pakistan, there's a dearth of in-depth investigations into how these services directly contribute to upholding human rights.

### **2.1 Research Gap**

The existing literature provides insights into the challenges of accessing justice in Pakistan and highlights the presence of legal aid programs. Still, it lacks a detailed exploration of the mechanisms through which legal aid functions as a safeguard for human rights. This study seeks to address this gap by delving into the specific impacts of legal aid services on human rights protection in Pakistan. By bridging this research gap, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the vital role of legal aid in promoting justice and equity in the country.

## **3. Legal Aid and Its Significance**

Legal aid is a fundamental pillar of a just society, ensuring that every individual, regardless of their financial circumstances, enjoys equitable access to justice. It pertains to the provision of legal support to those who lack the means to secure the services of a lawyer. Legal aid encompasses a broad spectrum of services, including offering legal counsel, representing clients in court, and providing assistance throughout legal proceedings. Its primary objective is to level the playing field, ensuring that the law acts as a shield for the vulnerable, not a weapon against them.

The connection between legal aid and human rights is profound. Human rights encompass the basic freedoms and protections to which every person is inherently entitled, including the right to a fair trial, freedom from torture, and equality before the law. Legal aid functions as a safeguard for these rights, guaranteeing that they are not mere words on paper

but tangible assurances for individuals. Legal aid serves as the means through which those whose rights have been violated can seek redress and hold wrongdoers accountable. In essence, legal aid empowers individuals to assert and safeguard their human rights (Beqiraj & McNamara, 2014).

On the international stage, clear standards and principles exist concerning legal aid. These standards underscore the crucial role of legal aid in ensuring a fair trial, upholding human rights, and promoting access to justice. For instance, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights emphasize the significance of legal assistance. These global agreements acknowledge that justice should not be a privilege but a universally accessible right. As a signatory to these agreements, Pakistan is obliged to adhere to these principles.

Within Pakistan, the legal framework for legal aid is primarily regulated by the Legal Aid Ordinance, 2020. This ordinance delineates the provision of legal aid services to individuals who lack the means to obtain legal representation. It also establishes the framework for legal aid programs and initiatives, whether government-initiated or facilitated by non-governmental organizations. Grasping this legal framework is indispensable for comprehending the structure and functioning of legal aid services in Pakistan.

#### **4. Access to Justice in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, various challenges and obstacles hinder marginalized communities' access to justice. These hurdles encompass financial constraints, limited awareness of legal rights, geographical remoteness from legal services, and social stigmas. Financial hardship is a prominent barrier; as numerous individuals are simply unable to afford legal representation. Furthermore, remote and underserved areas frequently lack legal aid services, further isolating marginalized communities from the legal system. A comprehensive understanding of these barriers is crucial for addressing the issues surrounding access to justice in Pakistan.

Legal aid assumes a pivotal role in tackling these access to justice challenges. It acts as a bridge connecting marginalized individuals with the legal system, furnishing them with essential support to navigate the intricacies of the law. By providing legal guidance, legal representation, and advocacy, legal aid services ensure that even those grappling with economic or societal challenges can seek justice and safeguard their rights. It serves as a vital mechanism for empowering individuals and communities, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

To gain insight into the real-world ramifications of the access to justice challenges, one can turn to case studies that illuminate the hardships faced by individuals in Pakistan. Amina, a divorced mother, sought custody of her young daughter after her husband's sudden disappearance. She faced social stigmas surrounding divorced women and legal barriers due to financial constraints. With the assistance of a legal aid organization, Amina received legal guidance and representation. Her case was successfully presented in court, and she regained custody of her daughter. Through an examination of these cases, a deeper understanding emerges of the tangible impact that legal aid can have in the pursuit of justice and the protection of human rights in Pakistan (Beqiraj & McNamara, 2015).

#### **5. Legal Aid Services in Pakistan**

Pakistan's legal landscape encompasses a multitude of legal aid organizations and initiatives, each tailored to specific needs, making them a vital component in bridging the justice gap. Take the Human Rights Legal Aid Center, which specializes in women's rights and offers legal aid to those facing domestic violence. This example illustrates the role of specialized legal aid providers in addressing specific challenges. These organizations collectively contribute to a more accessible justice system in Pakistan.

Government-driven legal aid programs are instrumental in ensuring that legal aid services are accessible to all citizens, especially the most marginalized. For instance, the Legal Aid Ordinance, of 2020, has allowed the Punjab Legal Aid Authority to establish legal aid centres across the province, offering free legal services. This example highlights the government's role in providing accessible legal aid. Government-backed initiatives

significantly impact marginalized communities by ensuring that even the poorest citizens have access to justice.

Non-governmental organizations and civil society play a crucial role in identifying gaps in legal aid services and addressing the unique needs of marginalized communities. The Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell, run by civil society activists, specializes in human rights cases and has been a key advocate for marginalized communities. This example illustrates how civil society bridges gaps in legal aid. These organizations are essential in ensuring that the most vulnerable individuals have access to justice.

Legal aid services act as a lifeline for marginalized communities, empowering individuals and providing them with knowledge and support to navigate the legal system. In rural Sindh, the Legal Empowerment and Aid Delivery Project (LEAD) has transformed the lives of women by providing legal aid in property disputes. This example highlights the transformative impact of legal aid. Legal aid empowers marginalized communities to break free from generational injustices and seek justice.

## **6. Human Rights and Legal Aid**

Denial of access to justice often leads to human rights violations, emphasizing the crucial role of legal aid in ensuring that human rights are tangible guarantees. In Balochistan, where forced disappearances have been rampant, the Balochistan Human Rights Organization provides legal aid to families searching for their missing loved ones, offering hope for accountability and justice. Legal aid serves as a beacon of hope for seeking justice and holding perpetrators accountable for human rights violations.

Legal aid is the practical embodiment of Pakistan's commitment to international human rights agreements, bridging the gap between rights and their enforcement. The Legal Aid Society of Pakistan actively takes up cases related to freedom of expression and media freedom, defending journalists and bloggers facing threats and harassment. This example showcases the role of legal aid in upholding fundamental human rights. Legal aid serves as the practical enforcer of human rights in Pakistan, ensuring that they are not just words on paper.

Real-life cases vividly demonstrate the tangible impact of legal aid in protecting human rights and ensuring justice. In Karachi, legal aid organizations have worked on cases of minority rights, including forced conversions. They have successfully represented individuals who faced religious discrimination and persecution, ensuring their right to religious freedom. These examples underscore the transformative role of legal aid in addressing human rights violations and delivering justice (Pakeeza, 2015).

## **7. Legal Aid for Specific Vulnerable Groups**

Legal aid plays a critical role in advancing women's rights and addressing gender-based violence. It provides essential support to women who have faced domestic violence, harassment, or discrimination. For instance, the Aurat Foundation in Pakistan offers a range of legal aid services to women in distress. They assist women in obtaining protection orders, pursuing cases against abusers, and securing custody of their children. Legal aid empowers women to seek justice and protection, promoting gender equality and combating violence. An example of this is the case of Sara, a survivor of domestic violence who, with the support of legal aid, was able to obtain a restraining order against her abusive spouse, ensuring her safety and that of her children.

Children require specialized legal assistance when they encounter the justice system. Legal aid for children's rights ensures that minors are treated by international standards and in the best interests of the child. The Child Rights Movement's legal aid services in Pakistan focus on advocating for child protection, especially for children in conflict with the law. They offer legal representation, rehabilitation, and reintegration support, redirecting young lives away from the cycle of crime. A case in point is the story of Ali, a juvenile offender who, with legal aid, received rehabilitation rather than a harsh sentence, allowing him to reintegrate into society and lead a law-abiding life.

Displaced populations often face complex legal challenges, including obtaining asylum or refugee status. Organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) collaborate with legal aid providers to assist refugees and migrants in Pakistan. Legal aid is instrumental in ensuring that displaced individuals are aware of their rights and can access the legal processes necessary for protection and resettlement. An illustrative case is that of Mariam, a refugee who, with legal aid support, successfully obtained asylum in Pakistan and protection from potential persecution in her home country.

Legal aid is indispensable for minority and indigenous communities, who frequently confront discrimination, marginalization, and threats to their cultural and land rights. The South Asia Partnership-Pakistan extends legal aid to such communities, addressing issues like land disputes, religious freedom, and cultural preservation. Legal aid empowers these communities to safeguard their rights, cultures, and lands. An example is the case of a marginalized indigenous community that, with legal aid, secured their land rights and preserved their cultural heritage, setting a precedent for other indigenous groups.

## **8. Legal Aid in Criminal Justice**

Legal aid is pivotal in guaranteeing that accused individuals receive a fair trial. The Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell, a human rights organization in Pakistan, has been at the forefront of defending individuals wrongfully accused of blasphemy, a charge that carries severe penalties. They provide legal representation to ensure due process and prevent miscarriages of justice. Legal aid is a safeguard against wrongful convictions, preserving the principle that justice must prevail over prejudice. The case of Aasia Bibi, a blasphemy accused who was acquitted with the support of legal aid, illustrates the life-altering impact of a fair trial and legal aid.

While legal aid is crucial, it faces challenges in assisting accused individuals. Lack of resources, overcrowded court dockets, and societal biases are some hurdles. The Legal Aid Society of Pakistan faces these challenges but continues to offer support to accused individuals, emphasizing the importance of overcoming these barriers to ensure justice for all. A specific example is the case of an indigent accused who, despite resource constraints, received legal aid, highlighting the dedication of legal aid providers in addressing these challenges (Ahmad & Hussain, 2020).

Legal aid's significance is amplified in death penalty cases, where the stakes are the highest. The Justice Project Pakistan provides legal aid to individuals facing the death penalty, often highlighting flaws in the criminal justice system. Their work underscores the importance of legal aid in protecting human rights, particularly in situations where irreversible harm can occur. The case of Zulfiqar Ali, who was exonerated after spending over 20 years on death row with the help of legal aid, serves as a testament to the crucial role of legal aid in preventing grave miscarriages of justice.

## **9. The Impact of Legal Aid on Human Rights**

Legal aid's impact on human rights is evidenced by a multitude of success stories and positive outcomes. A compelling case is that of Amina, a survivor of gender-based violence, who found empowerment through legal aid. With legal aid's support, she initiated legal action against her abuser, ultimately ensuring their accountability. These stories underscore how legal aid transforms into a powerful instrument for safeguarding and upholding human rights. The remarkable success stories highlight the practical difference legal aid can make in the quest for justice.

Legal aid organizations serve as formidable advocates in the battle against human rights abuses in Pakistan. They champion the causes of individuals whose rights have been trampled upon, often taking on cases that expose systemic human rights violations. Consider the legal aid rendered to individuals detained without trial, a situation that questions fundamental principles of due process and human rights protection. Legal aid is not merely a safety net for those affected by abuse but also a catalyst for addressing larger human rights predicaments (Cheema & Riaz, 2022).

Collaboration between legal aid organizations and human rights activists amplifies their capacity to effect change. These partnerships extend their reach to address more

extensive human rights challenges encompassing freedom of speech, assembly, and religious freedom. An exemplary instance is the cooperative endeavors of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and legal aid providers in advocating for individuals confronting blasphemy charges. This collaborative synergy reinforces the ability to confront human rights violations and instigate systemic transformations.

## **10. Challenges in Legal Aid in Pakistan**

One of the primary and most pressing challenges facing legal aid in Pakistan is the severe shortage of resources. Legal aid organizations often struggle with limited funding and resources, significantly hindering their ability to provide services to those in need. For example, the Legal Aid Society of Pakistan, a prominent legal aid provider, frequently faces financial constraints that restrict its capacity to meet the substantial demand for legal assistance. The scarcity of resources hampers the expansion of legal aid services and affects the quality of legal representation.

Moreover, Pakistan's diverse geographical landscape poses a significant barrier to access to justice. The majority of legal aid services are concentrated in urban centres, while rural and remote regions remain underserved. This geographical divide results in a justice gap, with vast portions of Pakistan's population having limited or no access to legal aid. For example, the province of Balochistan, which covers approximately 44% of Pakistan's land area, is notorious for its dearth of legal aid services. This deficiency exacerbates the already existing inequality in access to justice, particularly affecting marginalized and remote communities.

Meanwhile, A substantial part of Pakistan's population remains unaware of their legal rights and the existence of legal aid services. This lack of legal awareness further compounds the justice deficit. For instance, a study conducted in Punjab revealed that a significant number of respondents were unaware of legal aid services and the procedures for accessing them. This ignorance significantly hinders individuals from seeking the legal aid to which they may be entitled, creating a significant access barrier.

Apart from this, Pakistan continues to grapple with deeply rooted societal biases and discrimination, particularly against marginalized communities. Women, religious minorities, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face systemic prejudice when attempting to access legal aid. For example, a report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) highlights the discrimination faced by religious minorities in Pakistan's legal system, emphasizing a significant need for legal aid services to bridge this divide. The biases and discrimination add a layer of complexity to the challenges faced by legal aid organizations, necessitating strategies to address these biases effectively.

Similarly, Pakistan's legal aid infrastructure is woefully insufficient to meet the high demand for services. The existing legal aid organizations are often overwhelmed by cases and lack the human resources necessary to manage the caseload effectively. For instance, the Legal Aid Society of Pakistan has a limited number of lawyers and staff, which poses constraints in providing timely and quality legal assistance. This limitation hampers the organization's ability to reach all those in need and creates inefficiencies in the legal aid process.

Further, the legal system in Pakistan is characterized by complex and often protracted legal procedures. The complexity of these legal processes can be daunting for individuals seeking assistance, leading many to believe that pursuing legal rights is an arduous and time-consuming task. This perception acts as a deterrent, preventing individuals from accessing legal aid services to which they may be entitled. As a result, many forego seeking legal assistance, thus exacerbating the justice gap.

## **11. Future Prospects and Solutions**

Despite these formidable challenges, there are viable solutions and opportunities to enhance legal aid in Pakistan. The future of legal aid in the country relies on implementing reforms and innovative strategies to address the existing issues:

Overcoming geographical disparities in access to legal aid is imperative. Legal aid services should be expanded into underserved regions to bridge the gap effectively. Implementing mobile legal clinics, similar to the successful initiative by the Legal Aid Society of Pakistan, can extend legal services to remote and marginalized areas. These mobile clinics can travel to communities that would otherwise be overlooked, providing legal assistance and education.

Furthermore, to address the lack of legal awareness, comprehensive public awareness campaigns should be launched. These campaigns can inform citizens about their legal rights, the existence of legal aid services, and how to access them. The "Know Your Rights" campaigns in India are a notable example of how such efforts can empower individuals with essential legal knowledge.

Legal aid organizations must be equipped with more resources, including funding and personnel, to meet the demand for their services. Collaborative efforts with international donor agencies, local governments, and the private sector can bolster the capabilities of legal aid organizations, enabling them to serve more clients effectively. The allocation of additional resources and the strengthening of organizational capacities are crucial in addressing the challenges posed by resource limitations and inadequate infrastructure.

Along with this, Collaboration between the government and legal aid organizations is pivotal. Policymakers have the responsibility to allocate resources, enact legal aid legislation, and create an enabling environment for the growth of legal aid services. Government-led initiatives, such as establishing legal aid clinics in public hospitals or courthouses, can significantly enhance the accessibility of legal aid.

To address the challenges related to inadequate legal aid infrastructure, capacity-building programs should be implemented. Training more lawyers and support staff to handle legal aid cases effectively can help reduce the caseload burden on existing organizations. Programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of legal aid professionals can lead to more efficient and responsive legal aid services (Khan, 1996).

## **12. Conclusion**

The profound significance of legal aid in upholding human rights is undeniable. It serves as a lifeline, offering a glimmer of hope to those in dire need, a shield that guards against the relentless tide of human rights abuses, and a catalyst that fuels systemic change. Through legal aid, individuals are not only provided with essential assistance but they are also equipped with the tools to claim and safeguard their rights. It empowers them to challenge the injustices they face, promoting a more equitable and just society. Despite the progress that has been achieved, the struggle for improved access to justice in Pakistan continues. Marginalized communities still grapple with barriers that impede their access to legal aid and justice. It is an ongoing battle that requires unwavering commitment and collaborative efforts from all sectors of society. Addressing the challenges faced by these communities and enhancing legal aid services are perpetual tasks, vital for achieving a fair and just society. The potential of legal aid to contribute to a more just and equitable society is vast and promising. With the right reforms, strengthened collaboration, and a shared commitment to justice, legal aid can become a driving force. It can transform human rights from mere ideals into tangible, lived realities for all the people of Pakistan. This potential, if harnessed effectively, can shape a society where justice knows no economic or social bounds, and where human rights are not just respected but actively protected.

### **Authors Contribution:**

Gohar Masood Qureshi: Assistance in the article writing process and proofreading.

Anum Shahid: addressed the recommended directions for further research.

Faiza Chaudhary: Reviewing the article and making necessary revisions to ensure compliance with the journal's formatting requirements.

### **Conflict of Interests/Disclosures**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest w.r.t the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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