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**LEGAL AWARENESS AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE: EVALUATING  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN  
MURSHIDABAD**

**Swagatama Singha Roy**

Research Scholar, Political Science, Eklavya University, Damoh

**Dr. Shyam Sunder Pateriya**

Supervisor, Eklavya University, Damoh

**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the connection between legal awareness, access to justice, and institutional assistance to women in Murshidabad, West Bengal. Based on the secondary data of 2020-2023, the paper will provide a quantitative evaluation of legal aid consumption, the number of reported crimes, the efficiency of institutions, and the number of individuals who attend legal literacy courses. It has been found that there is a constant rise in the number of women who use the services of legal aid and a slight increase in the overall crime reporting but the cases of sexual harassment have risen considerably. Although the overall resolution rate was above 66 % in all the institutions, Women Help Desks recorded a relatively lower rate indicating that there should be more enforcement and sensitivity. The process of legal literacy also demonstrated differences between regions, as some blocks demonstrated positive female participation and others remained behind. The research identifies the achievements and existing structural inequalities in the provision of justice, and the necessity of specific measures to bring about comprehensive and successful legal empowerment of women in rural regions.

**Keywords:** Women's rights, legal awareness, access to justice, institutional support, Murshidabad, gender justice, crime reporting, and legal literacy.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The rights of women are part of human rights and a pillar to a fair and equal society. But even in India, women are still struggling to achieve these entitlements in most areas in the country, and the Murshidabad district of West Bengal is not an exception. In spite of the constitutional protection and the legislative measures, there is an existing gap between the paper rights and the enforcement or availability of such rights on the ground. This disparity is usually compounded by poor legal awareness, socio-cultural impediments, financial dependency and poor institutional structures.

The socio-economically heterogeneous Murshidabad and its population, in general, make an attractive argument in favor of the intersection between legal awareness and access to justice among women. High poverty rates, low literacy, particularly among women and poor access of the formal legal support system characterize the district. All these are the reasons why women are unable to pursue legal action against the problem of domestic violence, dowry harassment, right to inheritance, and discrimination in the workplace. Besides, the available institutional structures including legal aid services, women commissions, and local governance structures tend to be underutilized or inaccessible to the marginalized women owing to a number of operational bottlenecks as well as lack of awareness.

This research paper aims at determining the position of women in the legal rights in Murshidabad by determining their legal awareness level, the efficacy of institutional support systems and the practical problems they encounter in seeking justice. Through a multidisciplinary approach of legal analysis, field-based inquiry, and policy review, the research will identify the structural obstacles to the delivery of justice and offer practical solutions to eliminate the gap between the law and reality. By this it makes a contribution to the larger debate on gender justice and inclusive governance in rural India.

### **1.1. Understanding the Legal Landscape for Women in Murshidabad**

The legal system of India protects women in a broad spectrum, which is deeply rooted in the Constitution and is supported by the development of laws. Articles 14, 15 and 21 contain fundamental rights to equality before the law, prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex,

and right to life and personal liberty. In addition to these constitutional provisions, there are certain laws which are more specific in protecting women rights, and these laws include the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, which are more or less trying to ensure women rights in both the public and the private domains.

Though these rights are legally secured, their application and enjoyment of the same in Murshidabad are highly limited. The district being largely rural and characterised by socio-economic backwardness is reeling under the problems of gender inequality, early marriages, domestic violence and low levels of education among women. A large percentage of women either do not know their rights or do not want to take the legal route because of cultural taboos, fear of being socially shunned or not having family support. These reduce their ability to participate in the justice delivery system in a very serious manner.

The district has legal aid services institutionally through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) and Lok Adalats, which are aimed at offering free legal assistance to women belonging to marginalized communities. Yet, the access of these services is usually limited due to the lack of human resources, inadequate infrastructure, and coordination with the grass-root governance institutions like Panchayati Raj Institutions. The responsiveness and sensitivity of police to the issues of women are also not satisfactory and this further undermines the trust in the legal system.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Halder (2012) carried out a comparative study on the level of knowledge of urban and rural girls in the District of Murshidabad, West Bengal, and their awareness of legal rights. The research pinpointed a high difference between the two groups indicating that rural girls were usually not well-informed as compared to their urban counterparts. This disparity was explained by the socio-economic factors, inequalities in education, and absence of legal literacy programs, which means that legal awareness campaigns are needed among rural communities, as soon as possible.

Tomar (2023) analysed how legal aid can be used to defend the rights of women in India, and the importance of the constitutional and statutory provisions that guarantee access to justice. The paper

has explained the development of legal aid systems in the past to deal with gender discrimination and violence. Nonetheless, Tomar observed that there are still issues of bureaucracy, shortage of trained staff, and social discrimination that make women less willing to pursue justice using the formal system of law.

Saxena (2022) examined the rights of women in family courts in the post-pandemic era with special emphasis on the Ahmedabad District of Gujarat. The study focused on the implementation of virtual court systems and the effects on the women litigants. It was established that although virtual courts provided logistical ease and increased access, technological challenges, digital illiteracy, and internet connectivity remained a problem to effective participation of many women, particularly the marginalized groups.

Begum and Saha (2017) addressed the issues of women access to justice in Bangladesh and found out the structural, legal, and socio-cultural barriers. Some of the problems that the authors have identified include patriarchal interpretations of the law, poor access to legal assistance and weak institutional processes that all hinder access to justice by women. To overcome these systemic barriers, they promoted policy changes, gender-sensitive legal procedures, and improved support mechanisms.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study of the relationship between legal rights of women and institutional support in Murshidabad needs a methodologically sound study which has the foundation of credible data and analysis. Since the study in question is aimed at assessing the current structures and patterns rather than gathering new empirical evidence, the secondary-data-based approach has been chosen. This enables the organized review of official records, administrative data, and institutional statistics to evaluate the effectiveness, outreach and issues of justice mechanisms accessible to women in the district.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study is descriptive as well as analytical in nature and will use data to determine the condition of the legal rights of women, access to justice and the efficiency of the institutional support system

in the Murshidabad district. The research is quantitative in nature, however, is qualitative in orientation with regard to factual assessment and interpretation based on quantitative secondary data.

### **3.2. Analytical Tools and Techniques**

- Tabulation and percentage analysis were used to measure trends in legal aid access, crime reporting, and resolution rates.
- Comparative analysis across years (2020–2023) was conducted to identify changes or progress in key indicators.
- Block-level comparisons were included to assess regional variations in legal literacy efforts and participation rates.

### **3.3. Methodological Framework**

This is a methodology that seeks to determine the effectiveness of the legal aid institutions in Murshidabad by looking at their outreach and service provision. It also examines trends in crimes reported against women in order to determine extent of gender-based violence in the district. The study also assesses the effectiveness of the justice institutions by using case disposal rates and assessing the presence of women in legal literacy programs by blocks to determine awareness and reach of the institutions.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This part provides a quantitative evaluation of the legal rights of women and the support systems of institutions in Murshidabad based on secondary data collected by government reports, records of legal services, and statistics of crimes. The analysis is expected to gain insights into the trends in access to law, institutional performance, and participation of women in justice process in recent years.

**Table 1: Number of Women Beneficiaries of Legal Aid Services in Murshidabad (2020–2023)**

Year	Legal Aid Camps Held	Women Beneficiaries (Estimated)	Percentage of Total Beneficiaries (%)
2020	32	580	45%
2021	28	490	42%
2022	35	655	47%
2023	40	740	50%

Table 1 demonstrates that the number of legal aid camps organized and the number of beneficiaries, who are women, are increasing steadily in Murshidabad between 2020 and 2023. Although the number of camps decreased slightly in 2021, the general tendency shows that there are more and more institutional efforts at the expansion of legal aid services. The number of women beneficiaries rose from 580 in 2020 to 740 in 2023, with the percentage of women among total beneficiaries increasing from 45% to 50%.

**Table 2: Reported Cases of Women-Centric Crimes in Murshidabad (2020–2023)**

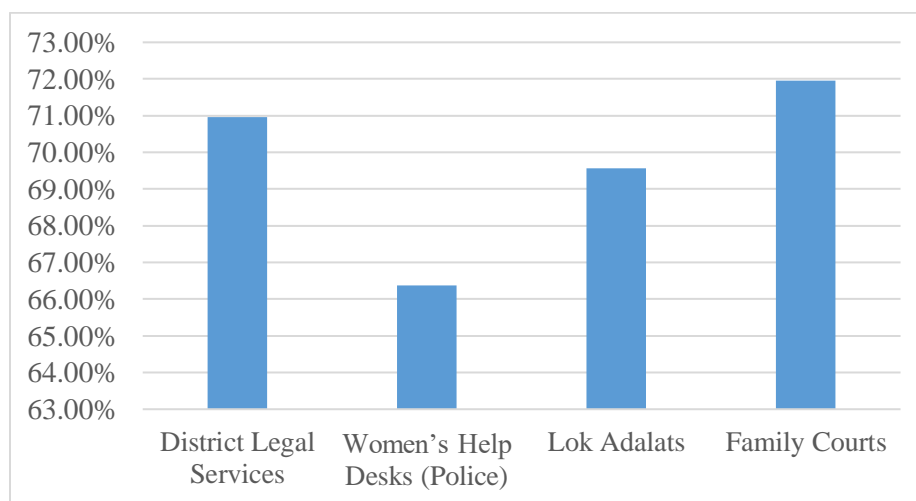
Year	Domestic Violence	Dowry Harassment	Sexual Harassment	Total Cases
2020	240	130	75	445
2021	255	120	90	465
2022	275	100	110	485
2023	260	95	125	480

Table 2 presented From 2020 to 2023, reported cases of sexual harassment increased by 66.7% (from 75 to 125), indicating either a rise in incidents or improved reporting. Dowry harassment cases declined by 26.9% (from 130 to 95), reflecting possible effects of legal deterrence and awareness. Domestic violence cases saw a moderate increase of 8.3% from 240 to a peak of 275 in 2022, before slightly dropping to 260 in 2023. The total reported cases rose by 7.9% from 445 in 2020 to 480 in 2023, highlighting a need for continued institutional and community response.

**Table 3: Institutional Response: Legal Services and Case Disposal (2023)**

Institution Type	Number of Institutions	Cases Registered	Cases Resolved	Resolution Rate (%)
District Legal Services	1	310	220	70.96%
Women’s Help Desks (Police)	15	580	385	66.38%
Lok Adalats	10	230	160	69.56%
Family Courts	2	410	295	71.95%

Table 3 illuminates on the performance of central legal institutions in Murshidabad in 2023. Family Courts registered the highest resolution rate of 71.95 %, followed by District Legal Services (70.96 %) and Lok adalats (69.56 %) and the lowest was 66.38 % in Women Help Desks. Although the capacities were different, the resolution rate was above 66 % in all institutions, which was moderate. Nevertheless, the statistics also indicate that institutional capacity to manage growing caseloads should be enhanced.



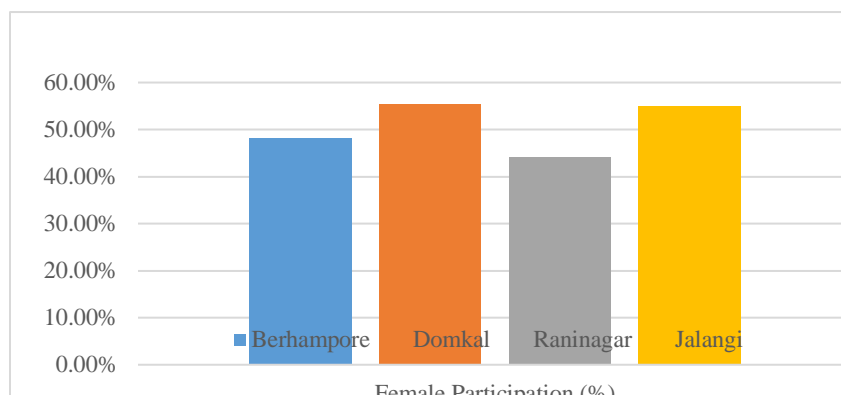
**Figure 1: Graphical presentation of percentage of Resolution Rate**

Figure 1 among the four types of institutions, Family Courts recorded the highest rate of case resolution at 71.95 % followed by District Legal Services at 70.96 % and Lok Adalats at 69.56 % which shows that they are relatively effective in resolving women related cases. The least resolution rate was registered at Women Help Desks with 66.38 %, which implies that better follow-ups should be introduced to the police level.

**Table 4: Gender Distribution of Legal Literacy Program Participants (Murshidabad, 2023)**

Block Name	Male Participants	Female Participants	Total Participants	Female Participation (%)
Berhampore	310	290	600	48.3%
Domkal	250	310	560	55.4%
Raninagar	280	220	500	44.0%
Jalangi	270	330	600	55.0%

Table 4 provides the data on the different degrees of female involvement in the legal literacy programs across the blocks of Murshidabad in the year 2023. Female participation in Domkal (55.4%) and Jalangi (55.0%) was higher than that of males and this fact shows that there is good outreach in these sectors. Raninagar (44.0%) and Berhampore (48.3%) were, on the contrary, less represented by females. On the whole, the numbers show positive patterns of women involvement as well as the necessity of special work in blocks with low rates of participation.



**Figure 2: Graphical presentation of percentage of female participation in legal literacy programs**

Figure 2 demonstrates that the number of females enrolled in legal literacy programs differed in 2023 in blocks. The female involvement was more in Domkal (55.4%) and Jalangi (55.0%) and the others (Raninagar 44.0% and Berhampore 48.3%) were behind. It means disproportionate outreach and the necessity to concentrate on the low-performing regions.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Data analysis of the Murshidabad district (2020-2023) shows that there is a gradual increase in the access of women to justice evident in the increased number of the beneficiaries of the legal aid and the participation of women in the legal literacy programs in various blocks. Although there have been a slight reduction in crimes such as dowry harassment, there are more cases of sexual harassment which may be indicative of increased reporting of such crimes by those who are aware of them and supported by institutions. The efficiency of the legal institutions viz District Legal Services, Family Courts, Lok Adalats, and Women Help Desks is moderate and the resolution rates are between 66% to 72 %. Nevertheless, the unequal distribution of the presence of females in different blocks and the relatively lower resolution in police-level help desks give the idea of the necessity of the higher institutional mechanisms and gender-sensitive legal interventions. On the whole, in spite of impressive advances, the Murshidabad region continues to demand further efforts aimed at filling in the existing gaps and providing women with equal access to the legal empowerment.

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**Swagatama Singha Roy**

**Dr. Shyam Sunder Pateriya**