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# Access to Justice for Women in India: Challenges and Realities

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## ABSTRACT

*Access to justice is a fundamental aspect of any democratic society and serves as a critical mechanism for the protection of individual rights and the promotion of equality. In India, although numerous laws and constitutional provisions aim to safeguard women's rights, the actual process of seeking justice remains complex and often inaccessible for many women. This paper explores the multifaceted barriers that women face in accessing justice, ranging from social stigma and economic hardship to institutional apathy and legal illiteracy.*

*Through an in-depth examination of the legal framework, key challenges, case studies, and the role of various stakeholders, this research highlights the persistent gap between legal rights on paper and their realization in practice. Special attention is given to intersectional factors such as caste, class, religion, and geography, which further marginalize certain groups of women and exacerbate their struggles within the justice system.*

*The study also evaluates efforts made by the state, judiciary, and civil society to bridge this gap and recommends actionable reforms aimed at making justice more inclusive, accessible, and gender-sensitive. Ultimately, the paper argues that achieving meaningful access to justice for women in India requires more than legal reforms—it demands a broader societal transformation rooted in gender equity and social justice.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Access to justice is a fundamental component of a democratic and equitable society. It ensures that every individual, regardless of gender, socio-economic background, or identity, has the opportunity to claim and enforce their legal rights. For women in India, however, this access is not always guaranteed in practice. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous legislative measures aimed at protecting women's rights, the reality for many women is marked by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder their ability to seek and obtain justice.

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India's legal landscape includes a wide array of statutes aimed at addressing violence, discrimination, and inequality faced by women. From the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and the more recent Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, the country has taken significant steps toward codifying protections for women. Judicial activism and public interest litigation have also contributed to expanding women's rights and ensuring state accountability. However, there exists a persistent gap between legal guarantees and their effective implementation.

Women often face a justice system that is not only procedurally complex and intimidating but also riddled with gender insensitivity and delays. The challenges are compounded for those who belong to marginalized communities—such as Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, or persons with disabilities—making their access to justice even more limited. Fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, lack of legal literacy, and financial dependency further prevent women from reporting violence or pursuing legal remedies.

Access to justice for women must therefore be understood not only as the ability to approach courts but also as the existence of a supportive environment where women can assert their rights without fear, intimidation, or discrimination. It involves timely and fair adjudication, effective legal aid, gender-sensitive law enforcement, and a society that encourages women to speak out against injustice.

This research seeks to critically examine the realities of access to justice for women in India. It explores the legal framework in place, the persistent barriers that obstruct women's access to justice, and the roles played by various stakeholders including the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, civil society, and the media. Through a combination of legal analysis, case studies, and comparative perspectives, the study aims to highlight both the progress made and the challenges that remain.

Ultimately, the paper aims to propose practical recommendations that can contribute to making justice more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of women in India, especially those who are most vulnerable. Bridging the gap between legal rights and lived realities is essential if India is to fulfill its constitutional promise of justice, equality, and dignity for all its citizens.

## **II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK ENSURING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

### **A. Constitutional provisions**

The Constitution of India forms the foundation of women's rights and access to justice. It enshrines several guarantees that aim to protect the dignity, equality, and liberty of all citizens, with special emphasis on gender justice. Key constitutional provisions include:

- **Article 14:** Ensures equality before the law and equal protection of the laws.
- **Article 15(1):** Prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.
- **Article 15(3):** Permits the state to make special provisions for women and children, acknowledging the need for affirmative action.
- **Article 21:** Guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which has been judicially interpreted to include the right to live with dignity, protection from violence, and access to justice.
- **Directive Principles (Articles 39 and 42):** Direct the state to ensure equal pay, humane working conditions, and maternity relief.

These constitutional safeguards are supported by judicial interpretations that have expanded the meaning of gender justice and have played a critical role in protecting women's rights in India.

## **B. Key legislations protecting women's rights**

Over the years, several progressive laws have been enacted to address gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequality. Some of the most significant ones are:

### **1. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961**

This Act prohibits the giving, taking, or demanding of dowry. Though the law exists, dowry-related violence and deaths continue to be reported, pointing to poor implementation and societal complicity.<sup>3</sup>

### **2. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005**

A comprehensive legislation addressing physical, emotional, sexual, verbal, and economic abuse within domestic relationships. It provides women the right to reside in the shared household and access protection orders, residence orders, and monetary relief.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran (ed.), *Women and Law: Critical Feminist Perspectives* (Sage, 2014), pp. 45–46.

<sup>4</sup> Jayanth K. Krishnan, "Social Justice and Access to Courts in India," *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), pp. 558–559.

### **3. Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013**

Popularly known as the POSH Act, it mandates every workplace to have an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) and lays down a grievance redressal mechanism. It stems from the Vishaka Guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court in 1997.<sup>5</sup>

### **4. Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013**

Following the Nirbhaya case, this amendment introduced stringent punishments for offences like sexual harassment, voyeurism, stalking, and acid attacks. It also broadened the definition of rape and enhanced the role of victim compensation schemes.<sup>6</sup>

### **5. Equal Remuneration Act, 1976**

Ensures equal pay for equal work and prevents gender-based discrimination in recruitment and service conditions.<sup>7</sup>

### **6. Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 2017)**

Provides paid maternity leave, nursing breaks, and job security during pregnancy, empowering women to balance career and family without discrimination.

### **7. Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971 (Amended 2021)**

Recognizes a woman's reproductive autonomy and allows safe and legal abortion under certain conditions. The 2021 amendment extends the gestation limit and privacy protection.

## **C. Judicial activism and landmark judgments**

The Indian judiciary has played a pivotal role in expanding the scope of women's rights and access to justice through progressive judgments. Key examples include:

- **Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan:** Laid down the first guidelines for addressing workplace sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup>
- **Laxmi v. Union of India:** Led to regulatory control over acid sales and support for acid attack survivors.

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<sup>5</sup> Vrinda Bhandari, "Access to Justice for Women in India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2018), p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Justice Verma Committee Report on Amendments to Criminal Law, 2013, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> National Commission for Women, Annual Report 2020–21, available at: <https://ncw.nic.in>

<sup>8</sup> The Supreme Court's ruling in *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* laid the foundation for workplace safety by framing legally binding guidelines in the absence of specific legislation. AIR 1997 SC 3011.

- **Independent Thought v. Union of India:** Recognized marital rape involving minors as a criminal offence.<sup>9</sup>
- **Shayara Bano v. Union of India:** Declared triple talaq unconstitutional, ensuring gender justice in personal laws.

These judgments reflect the judiciary's evolving understanding of gender justice, often compensating for legislative or executive inaction.

### III. KEY CHALLENGES TO ACCESSING JUSTICE FOR WOMEN IN INDIA

Despite the presence of constitutional safeguards and gender-specific legislations, the practical realization of justice for women in India remains a distant goal for many. Various social, cultural, economic, and systemic barriers continue to obstruct their path to fair legal redress. This chapter highlights the major challenges women face in accessing justice, especially those from marginalized and vulnerable sections of society.<sup>10</sup>

#### A. Societal and cultural pressures

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes still dominate many parts of Indian society. Women who choose to seek justice—especially in cases related to sexual assault, domestic violence, or marital disputes—often face social ostracization, victim-shaming, and familial pressure to remain silent. Traditional notions of family honor and shame are frequently prioritized over a woman's individual rights and dignity, discouraging many from taking legal action.

#### B. Financial constraints

Economic dependence is one of the biggest hurdles for women in seeking justice. Many women, especially those from rural or lower-income backgrounds, lack the financial resources required to hire legal counsel, bear litigation costs, or travel to courts. The situation worsens in prolonged legal battles where repeated hearings, court fees, and associated costs become unaffordable. While legal aid services exist, they are often under-resourced and poorly implemented.<sup>11</sup>

#### C. Lack of legal awareness

A significant proportion of Indian women are unaware of their legal rights and available

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<sup>9</sup> In *Independent Thought v. Union of India*, the Court criminalized marital rape of minors, marking a significant shift in the interpretation of child protection and consent laws. (2017) 10 SCC 800.

<sup>10</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, *Women and Law: Critical Feminist Perspectives* (Sage, 2014), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Jayanth K. Krishnan, "Social Justice and Access to Courts in India," *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), p. 559.

remedies. Limited access to education, language barriers, and lack of exposure to legal institutions contribute to this gap. Many women are unaware that they can file complaints, demand protection, or even seek monetary relief under specific laws. This ignorance often leads to underreporting of crimes and exploitation at various stages of the legal process.<sup>12</sup>

#### **D. Gender bias in law enforcement**

Law enforcement agencies are the first point of contact for victims seeking justice. Unfortunately, gender insensitivity and bias among police personnel often discourage women from filing complaints. Cases of police refusal to register FIRs, victim-blaming, or trivializing women's grievances are not uncommon. The lack of trained and gender-sensitive officers, especially female personnel, further adds to the trauma and humiliation faced by women during the legal process.<sup>13</sup>

#### **E. Judicial delays and procedural complexities**

The Indian judicial system is notorious for its slow pace. Women who do pursue legal action often face long-drawn trials, frequent adjournments, and procedural delays. The complexity of legal procedures and use of technical language make the system inaccessible to women unfamiliar with the legal process. In many cases, victims are forced to relive their trauma repeatedly during court proceedings, contributing to emotional exhaustion.

#### **F. Inadequate infrastructure and support services**

A lack of support services such as legal aid centers, shelter homes, crisis centers, and one-stop support facilities severely hampers women's ability to seek justice. Even in urban areas, such services are limited, underfunded, or difficult to access. In rural and remote regions, they are nearly non-existent. Moreover, the absence of child care facilities, transportation support, and medical assistance discourages women from attending court or pursuing legal redress.

#### **G. Intersectional discrimination**

Women who belong to marginalized communities—such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, LGBTQ+ individuals, or persons with disabilities—face compounded discrimination within the justice system. A Dalit woman, for example, may experience both caste-based and gender-based prejudice, making her journey to justice even more difficult. Intersectional oppression magnifies the vulnerabilities of these women and often leads to institutional neglect or deliberate exclusion.

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<sup>12</sup> National Commission for Women, "Legal Awareness Programme Report," 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Justice Verma Committee Report on Amendments to Criminal Law, 2013, p. 147.

## **H. Fear of retaliation**

Many women fear backlash from perpetrators, families, or society after reporting crimes or seeking legal protection. Threats of violence, social isolation, loss of livelihood, or child custody battles are often used to silence women. In some cases, women withdraw complaints due to fear of retribution or pressure from influential community members. This fear is especially intense in cases involving powerful accused or those with political connections.

## **I. Victim-blaming and secondary trauma**

Victims of gender-based violence often face intrusive questioning, public shaming, and character assassination—both inside and outside the courtroom. This "secondary victimization" can be as damaging as the original offence. The lack of trauma-informed procedures, insensitive cross-examinations, and media sensationalism further deepen the emotional and psychological scars. The fear of being blamed or disbelieved discourages many women from seeking justice.<sup>14</sup>

# **IV. CASE STUDIES AND REAL-LIFE ILLUSTRATIONS**

Understanding the realities of women's access to justice in India requires more than a review of laws—it demands engagement with real-life experiences that reflect the systemic challenges discussed in earlier chapters. This chapter explores several high-profile as well as lesser-known cases that highlight how social, institutional, and cultural factors shape women's pursuit of justice.

## **A. The Nirbhaya case (2012): a catalyst for reform**

One of the most widely known cases of gender-based violence in India, the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder of a young woman, often referred to as "Nirbhaya," shocked the nation and brought global attention to the issue of women's safety and justice in India.<sup>15</sup>

- **Impact:** The case led to massive public protests and demands for legal reform.
- **Judicial Response:** The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 was introduced, expanding the definition of rape, introducing new offences (such as stalking and voyeurism), and establishing fast-track courts.
- **Reality Check:** While the legal reforms were significant, systemic issues like police apathy, social stigma, and judicial delay continue to affect other survivors of sexual violence.

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<sup>14</sup> UN Women India, "Access to Justice for Survivors of Violence," 2021 Report.

<sup>15</sup> Justice Verma Committee Report, 2013, p. 8.



### B. Bhanwari Devi Case (1992): sexual harassment at the workplace

Bhanwari Devi, a grassroots social worker in Rajasthan, was gang-raped by upper-caste men for stopping a child marriage. Despite her courageous reporting, she was denied justice due to caste bias and lack of institutional support.<sup>16</sup>

- **Impact:** The case led to the landmark **Vishaka judgment** (1997) where the Supreme Court laid down guidelines for preventing sexual harassment at the workplace.
- **Lessons:** It exposed the vulnerability of women working in rural and informal sectors and the intersections of caste and gender-based violence.

### C. Dalit women in rural India: the silent survivors

Numerous cases have emerged where Dalit women and girls are subjected to sexual violence, yet struggle to access justice due to caste-based oppression and fear of retaliation.<sup>17</sup>

- **Example:** The Hathras case (2020), where a 19-year-old Dalit girl was allegedly gang-raped and later died of her injuries, sparked national outrage.
- **Barriers:** Victims' families were reportedly harassed, and the authorities were accused of mishandling evidence and denying basic rights like performing last rites.
- **Insight:** These cases illustrate how marginalized identities face layered discrimination and systemic neglect within the justice system.

### D. Survivors of domestic violence: a struggle for legal and social support

Domestic violence remains one of the most underreported crimes in India. Many women suffer silently due to social stigma, economic dependence, and lack of awareness about their legal rights.<sup>18</sup>

- **Case Example:** In several studies, women who approached the police for protection under the **Domestic Violence Act, 2005**, reported being advised to "adjust" or "reconcile" rather than receive legal aid or protection orders.
- **Institutional Failure:** Poor implementation of protection mechanisms and lack of trained support staff make it difficult for women to leave abusive situations.

### E. Women from minority communities: navigating dual marginalization

Women belonging to religious minorities often experience dual marginalization—based on

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<sup>16</sup> Agnes, Flavia. *Law and Gender Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, "India: Dalit Woman's Death Highlights Rape Impunity," October 2020.

<sup>18</sup> National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2021, Domestic Violence Module.

both gender and religion. This intersection can lead to additional hurdles in accessing justice.

- **Example:** Several reports show that Muslim women facing triple talaq, domestic violence, or custody issues often hesitate to approach state institutions due to fear of religious stereotyping or backlash from within their community.
- **Progress:** The **Shayara Bano v. Union of India** case (2017) struck down instant triple talaq and was a milestone for Muslim women's rights. However, access to legal relief continues to be uneven due to social pressure and lack of legal literacy.

#### **F. Workplace harassment: gaps in implementation**

Despite the POSH Act, 2013, workplace harassment remains underreported, especially in informal sectors, small businesses, and rural areas.<sup>19</sup>

- **Observation:** Many organizations fail to constitute Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), and women are often unaware of the redressal process.
- **Real Case:** A 2020 study revealed that domestic workers and factory workers were particularly vulnerable, with no clear mechanisms for reporting abuse and limited support from employers or authorities.

#### **G. Role of civil society: bridging the gap**

In several cases, women could only access justice due to the intervention of NGOs, women's rights groups, or legal aid clinics.

- **Example:** Organizations like the **Majlis Legal Centre** and **Jagori** have helped hundreds of women file cases, access shelters, and navigate legal procedures.
- **Significance:** These efforts show the importance of community support and non-state actors in enabling justice, especially when state mechanisms fail.

### **V. ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN IMPROVING ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

Ensuring effective access to justice for women in India is not the responsibility of the legal system alone—it requires the active participation of multiple stakeholders, including the judiciary, government, law enforcement agencies, civil society, media, and community institutions. Each of these actors plays a critical role in shaping the justice delivery mechanism and influencing how women experience the system. This chapter examines the contribution and shortcomings of these stakeholders in addressing the barriers that hinder women's access to justice.

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<sup>19</sup> Oxfam India, *India Discrimination Report*, 2022, p. 45.

### A. Role of the judiciary in interpreting women's rights

The Indian judiciary has often taken a progressive approach in interpreting laws to safeguard and enhance women's rights. Landmark rulings by the Supreme Court and High Courts have not only expanded the scope of constitutional protections but have also filled legislative gaps through judicial activism.

- **Expanding Rights:** In *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, the judiciary issued guidelines to address workplace sexual harassment in the absence of legislation. In *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, it struck down triple talaq, reinforcing the constitutional right to equality.
- **Humanizing Justice:** Courts have acknowledged the importance of dignity, privacy, and protection from secondary trauma, especially in cases involving sexual violence.
- **Challenges:** Despite these efforts, judicial delays, inconsistent rulings, and lack of gender-sensitized benches in lower courts still impede timely and fair justice for many women.

### B. Government schemes and initiatives

The Indian government has launched various schemes and policies aimed at empowering women and facilitating legal support. These include both preventive and remedial mechanisms.

- **Legal Aid Services:** Under the *Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987*, women are entitled to free legal aid, but awareness and effective delivery remain weak.<sup>20</sup>
- **One-Stop Centres (OSCs):** Established to provide integrated support—including legal aid, counseling, and shelter—to victims of violence. However, implementation varies widely across states.<sup>21</sup>
- **Women Helplines (181)** and initiatives like *Mahila Police Volunteers* have been introduced to make law enforcement more accessible.
- **Limitations:** Poor infrastructure, insufficient funding, and lack of monitoring often result in subpar delivery of services, especially in rural and remote regions.

### C. Role of police and law enforcement agencies

As the first point of contact, police play a crucial role in determining whether justice is

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<sup>20</sup> National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Annual Report 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development, OSC Progress Report, 2021.

initiated or denied. Their responsiveness, sensitivity, and conduct significantly impact a woman's willingness to report crimes.

- **Positive Steps:** Establishment of women's help desks and exclusive women police stations in some states has improved accessibility.
- **Gender Sensitization:** Training programs have been initiated in various states to instill gender sensitivity among officers.
- **Persistent Issues:** However, widespread reports of police apathy, refusal to file FIRs, victim-blaming, and corruption still discourage women from approaching the police.

#### **D. Role of NGOs and civil society organizations**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's rights groups have consistently filled gaps left by formal institutions by providing grassroots support, awareness, and legal aid.

- **Awareness and Advocacy:** NGOs conduct legal literacy programs, run shelters, and assist women through the legal process.
- **Legal Aid and Counseling:** Organizations like *Majlis Legal Centre* and *Jagori* have helped women navigate court systems, access safe spaces, and receive psychological support.
- **Policy Influence:** Civil society also plays a key role in lobbying for legal reforms and monitoring state accountability.<sup>22</sup>
- **Challenges:** Many NGOs struggle with funding, political pressures, and limited outreach in deeply conservative or conflict-prone areas.<sup>23</sup>

#### **E. Role of media in shaping perception and mobilization**

Media can be a powerful tool in both raising awareness and influencing public opinion. It has played a crucial role in highlighting landmark cases and pushing for reforms.<sup>24</sup>

- **Awareness Creation:** High-profile cases like the Nirbhaya case gained national and international attention due to extensive media coverage.
- **Sensitization:** Media campaigns have encouraged conversations about women's rights and gender equality.

#### **F. Importance of gender sensitization among stakeholders**

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<sup>22</sup> Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), *Status of Policing in India Report*, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Majlis Legal Centre, *Impact Review Report*, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Press Council of India, *Norms of Journalistic Conduct*, 2020 Edition.

Gender sensitivity training is essential for police, judges, lawyers, doctors, and support staff to understand the unique needs of women in the justice process.

- **Training Programs:** Several states have introduced training modules for judicial officers and law enforcement personnel.
- **Long-Term Impact:** Creating an empathetic, respectful, and supportive environment encourages women to report crimes and trust institutions.

#### **G. Community and local governance institutions**

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), local women's groups, and self-help groups (SHGs) can serve as the first line of support for rural women.

- **Community Mediation:** In some areas, local women's collectives have successfully mediated disputes and supported survivors.
- **Drawbacks:** In many conservative regions, community mechanisms may uphold patriarchal norms and pressure women to compromise rather than seek legal redress.

## **VI. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Achieving meaningful access to justice for women in India requires more than legal reforms—it demands systemic transformation, institutional accountability, and deep societal change. Drawing from the challenges identified and comparative lessons explored, this chapter presents practical and policy-based recommendations to bridge the gap between legal rights and their actual realization for women.

#### **A. Strengthening legal awareness and education**

- **Legal Literacy Campaigns:** Launch sustained legal awareness programs, especially in rural and marginalized communities, using local languages and culturally relevant methods.<sup>25</sup>
- **Incorporating Gender Justice in Education:** Schools and colleges should include modules on gender rights, constitutional values, and redressal mechanisms.
- **Community Outreach:** Use local governance bodies, self-help groups, and NGOs to disseminate legal knowledge and empower women at the grassroots level.

#### **B. Enhancing gender sensitization and training**

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<sup>25</sup> National Commission for Women, *Legal Awareness Programmes Report*, 2021.

- **Mandatory Training:** Make gender sensitization training compulsory for police, judges, prosecutors, medical professionals, and court staff.<sup>26</sup>
- **Curriculum Reform:** Update police and judicial training academies with modules on gender justice, trauma-informed care, and intersectionality.
- **Incentivize Performance:** Encourage performance-based evaluations that reward gender-sensitive conduct in public institutions.

#### C. Institutional reforms and fast-track mechanisms

- **Gender-Sensitive Courts:** Establish more fast-track courts for crimes against women and ensure they follow survivor-centric procedures.<sup>27</sup>
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Set up independent bodies to monitor the implementation of laws and hold officials accountable for negligence or insensitivity.
- **Victim Support Cells:** Institutionalize support systems in every district that provide legal, psychological, and medical aid under one roof.

#### D. Expanding and improving legal aid services

- **Accessibility:** Strengthen the Legal Services Authorities at the district level with adequate staffing and mobile legal aid units.
- **Quality Control:** Develop a monitoring system to ensure the competence and accountability of lawyers assigned through legal aid.<sup>28</sup>
- **Legal Clinics:** Encourage law colleges to run legal aid clinics in collaboration with NGOs and local authorities.

#### E. Bridging urban-rural disparities

- **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in setting up courts, shelters, and legal aid centers in underserved rural and tribal areas.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Promote the use of technology to offer remote legal consultations, online filing of complaints, and virtual hearings for women in remote areas.
- **Mobile Courts:** Establish mobile courts that visit remote areas periodically to address pending cases and spread awareness.

#### F. Protecting women from retaliation and ensuring safety

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<sup>26</sup> UN Women India, *Gender Sensitization Toolkit for Police and Judiciary*, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Law and Justice, *Fast Track Special Courts Scheme Status Report*, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> NALSA, *Annual Legal Services Report*, 2023.

- **Witness Protection Programs:** Create effective protection schemes for survivors and witnesses in sensitive cases, especially sexual violence and domestic abuse.
- **Anonymity Options:** Allow survivors to maintain confidentiality during trials, especially in cases of sexual assault and harassment.

#### **G. Strengthening institutional coordination**

- **Multi-Agency Task Forces:** Create coordination bodies involving police, health, judiciary, and social welfare departments to streamline response to gender-based violence.
- **Centralized Databases:** Develop national databases of registered offences, survivor progress reports, and institutional accountability data.
- **Regular Audits:** Conduct periodic audits of police stations, courts, and shelters to ensure compliance with women's rights standards.

#### **H. Promoting gender equality through policy integration**

- **Gender Budgeting:** All government departments should implement gender budgeting to assess how policies impact women.
- **Inclusive Policy Design:** Involve women, especially from marginalized groups, in drafting and reviewing laws and policies affecting them.
- **Intersectional Approach:** Ensure that reforms consider overlapping issues such as caste, religion, disability, and economic status.

#### **I. Media responsibility and ethical reporting**

- **Training for Journalists:** Conduct gender sensitivity workshops for media professionals to prevent victim-blaming or sensationalism.<sup>29</sup>
- **Regulatory Guidelines:** Enforce ethical guidelines for reporting cases of violence against women, ensuring privacy and dignity of survivors.
- **Use of Media for Change:** Promote positive narratives around survivors who seek justice and highlight successful legal interventions.

#### **J. Role of civil society and NGOs**

- **Capacity Building:** Increase financial and institutional support for NGOs working on women's justice and empowerment.

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<sup>29</sup> Press Council of India, *Guidelines on Reporting Sexual Offences*, 2019.

- **Legal Partnerships:** Collaborate with bar associations and law firms to provide pro bono services in underserved areas.
- **Monitoring and Advocacy:** Encourage civil society to monitor state action, expose institutional failures, and advocate for legal and policy change.

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