

NEWSLETTER
October - December 2023

LAS

LEGAL AID SOCIETY

RESHAPING SOLUTIONS FOR
ACCESSING JUSTICE IN PAKISTAN

10
years of
IMPACT
& Justice

Sl. No.	Name	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation	Income Source	Address	Phone No.	Signature
1	Muhammad Ali	35	Male	Married	Farmer	Wheat	123 Main St, Lahore	9999 9999	
2	Sadia Begum	45	Female	Married	Homemaker	None	456 Park Ave, Karachi	8888 8888	
3	Imran Khan	28	Male	Single	Student	Scholarship	789 School Rd, Islamabad	7777 7777	
4	Ahmed Raza	55	Male	Married	Retired	Pension	101 Old City, Rawalpindi	6666 6666	
5	Fatima Zahra	30	Female	Married	Teacher	Salary	202 New Market, Faisalabad	5555 5555	
6	Usman Khan	40	Male	Married	Business	Trade	303 Market St, Multan	4444 4444	
7	Shahida Begum	50	Female	Married	Welder	Welding	404 Industrial Zone, Lahore	3333 3333	
8	Abdullah Khan	38	Male	Married	Driver	Salary	505 Transport Hub, Karachi	2222 2222	
9	Farah Khan	25	Female	Single	Unemployed	None	606 Residential Area, Islamabad	1111 1111	
10	Muhammad Bilal	42	Male	Married	Construction	Wage	707 Construction Site, Lahore	0000 0000	

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF LEGAL EMPOWERMENT ACROSS PAKISTAN

Celebrating a decade of **ADVOCACY, RESEARCH, POLICY REFORMS, AND LEGAL AWARENESS & EMPOWERMENT**

From the desk of **Justice (R) Nasir Aslam Zahid**
(Chairperson & Founder, LAS)



celebrated one decade of LAS by reflecting on our organizational values, working culture, and our core reason for existence: spreading legal empowerment in Pakistan. As we closed off some challenging recent years in which we saw struggles with terrorism, pandemics, and natural calamities, we leveraged technology so that the provision of legal advice, legal awareness, and legal guidance could continue.

hour of need have always been our most significant milestones and indicators of success. We wholeheartedly thank all our donors, partners, stakeholders, and employees who have worked with us to attain justice for thousands nationwide.

To celebrate this milestone, LAS celebrated 10 years of its journey with all its employees and consultants from across the country. The day was blessed by the presence of the senior management team who shared the vision for the way forward.

Facing and resolving problems unseen in the past, we drew strength from the fulfillment we get from the thousands of lives we have touched and impacted positively, as we prepare for the future's unexpected challenges. The lives that we benefitted and transformed in the

Justice (R) Nasir Aslam Zahid
(Chairperson & Founder, LAS)

There have often been delays in justice for the most vulnerable and oppressed members of our society. In such times, we laid the foundation for the Legal Aid Society (LAS) ten years ago with the vision of improving access to justice for those who needed it the most.

Although the provision of justice and litigation is at the heart of what we do, our wings expand from advocacy to policy implementation, from research reports to data-driven reforms, and from legal assistance to Climate change justice. We



Short Documentary

As we reflect on this journey of a decade, we look ahead to serve Pakistan in the times to come. Watch our short documentary by clicking (in case of receiving a soft copy) or scanning the QR code.



EDITORIAL SECTION: from the desk of Muhammad Shahzar Illahi (Program Delivery Specialist, LAS / Associate Director, MICADR)

Pakistan's Mediation Movement: DAWN OF A NEW ERA OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION



A father plays with his two children in one of the two freshly mowed lawns between the grey structures of the main building and the Chief Justice Complex of the Old Islamabad High Court. Sitting at a nearby bench is the father's lawyer overseeing the meeting scheduled today, granted graciously by the family judge. The children's mother, waiting in the adjacent lawn, is intimidated by her lawyer that time is up. The two proceed to collect the children. The father hands them over after tight hugs and teary eyes. The mother looks visibly distraught as she walks away while the children wave goodbyes to their father until they meet him again next month. The case for the custody of children continues, with only guesstimates in terms of when it shall end. The family judge, after all, faces a cause list of more than eighty cases a day.

Pakistan faces a case pendency of 2.3 million, with only 4,300 judges nationwide to adjudicate them. Roughly 60,000 cases are pending before the 16 judges of the highest court of law in the land. According to official figures by the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, it takes 15 years on average for a civil case to conclude. To make matters worse, Pakistan's judiciary currently operates with 20-25%

vacant positions primarily due to the unwillingness or lack of adequate skills among the legal fraternity to qualify as judges.

The highly litigious nature of our society, lack of alternative mechanisms to resolve disputes, and dearth of an effective case management system to filter frivolous suits and FIRs are primarily to be blamed for the enormous case backlog, along with an adversarial, centralized, and overly regulated judicial system inherited from our former colonizers. Countries faced with similar challenges have tried various methods to rid themselves of their case backlogs. However, only one mechanism seems to stand out in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness: Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).

Coined at the Global Pound Conference series held in the late 1970s in the US, the term Alternative Dispute Resolution refers to legally and constitutionally recognized mechanisms and methods of settling disputes outside courts. Negotiation, mediation, settlement conferences, and arbitrations are all forms of ADR, with mediation

taking center stage as one of the most successful, globally-tested dispute resolution mechanisms being practiced worldwide.

Mediation is a process where a trained Mediator facilitates a negotiated settlement between disputing parties. Since its formal incorporation into the English Justice system following the Woolfe Reforms (1998), cases worth £190 billion have been successfully resolved through mediation in the UK. Turkiye has resolved more than 3 million cases since enacting the Turkish Mediation Law in 2012. Chinese courts referred 5.1 million cases in 2020 alone to court-annexed mediation centers. 56 nations are now signatories to the Singapore Convention on Mediation, which allows cross-border settlements to be effectively enforced in member states. What is most encouraging is that Pakistan has formally welcomed mediation and, so far, with open arms.

Following the ineffectiveness of the 1940 Arbitration Act, the legislature formally introduced mediation into Pakistan's legal system through a



Shahzar Illahi briefing Justice Ijaz ul Ahsan (Supreme Court), Chief Justice Islamabad High Court and judges of Islamabad High court regarding the IHC-Court Annexed Mediation Center established by the Legal Aid Society

series of laws and amendments. The Islamabad ADR Act 2017, the Amendments to CPC sections 89A & B in Sindh, the Punjab ADR Act 2019, the KPK ADR Act 2021, the Balochistan ADR Act 2022, and the recent Gilgit Baltistan Mediation Bill 2023 (passed by the GB Cabinet and awaiting GBA approval) lay down a robust mechanism of mediation across the country that allow for all civil, family, commercial and similar disputes, along with compoundable criminal offenses with punishments up to three years to be mediated by accredited and notified mediators. As per the aforementioned laws, minutes or details of a mediation proceeding are protected and confidential; the maximum time for mediation is between 45 to 75 days, and robust regulatory oversight mechanisms have been established to ensure the quality of mediators and mediation centers.

The Supreme Court ADR Task Force with one High Court judge and Law Department representatives from each jurisdiction, is making strides in institutionalizing a robust mediation ecosystem across Pakistan. More than 250 internationally accredited mediators and 1,000 mediation advocates have been trained and notified across Sindh, Islamabad, and Gilgit Baltistan alone. Various ADR Centers offering domestic and international mediation services have been notified by the Federal Government and respective provincial High Courts. Musaliha International Center for Arbitration & Dispute Resolution (MICADR), a notified ADR center, has received over 60 court-referred cases for mediation in the last three months alone and maintained a resounding success rate of 83% and an average resolution time of 4-5 days. Most recently, the Islamabad High Court Court-Annexed Mediation Center was launched, making it easy for the district judiciary to refer matters to a court-managed mediation facility. The presence of Internationally Accredited Mediators in benches across the higher judiciary, such as Justice Jawad Sarwana, Justice Sardar Ejaz Ishaq Khan, and Justice Mansoor Ali Shah, has added much-needed momentum to Pakistan's Mediation Movement.



Pilot interventions led by provincial governments, high courts, and civil society organizations such as the Legal Aid Society of Pakistan have demonstrated incredible results. What is critically needed is for the government to create a mass awareness campaign, informing the general public of existing mediation ecosystems. LAS, for instance, has held community awareness sessions with more than 30,000 citizens across 8 districts of Sindh, leading to more than 2,000 cases being diverted towards formal ADR channels. In addition, deviating mediation systems to district and tehsil levels is cardinal to ensure ease-of-access. Police Dispute Resolution Centers, District Administration offices, and Local Governments are only some of the many formal structures that need to be capacitated and linked to existing mediation ecosystems in order to provide expeditious and expedient dispute resolution services to individuals, families, and entities alike. Members of the legal fraternity must be trained as

Mediation Advocates to represent their clients effectively in mediation proceedings. The recent training of 750 members of the Sindh High Court Bar Association as mediation advocates is a testament to the increasing appetite for mediation among the legal fraternity.

More importantly, given that investors are always more likely to invest in jurisdictions with robust ADR ecosystems (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE have all developed efficient commercial mediation ecosystems and have officially ratified the Singapore Convention over the last 3 years), Pakistan must prioritize the building of an effective 'Investor-State Mediation' ecosystem whereby time & cost-effective mediation platforms are exhausted in international investment disputes before the investors are taken to arbitration or the courts. This perhaps needs to be adopted by the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) as a foremost agenda for improving Pakistan's investment climate.



RESTORING FAITH IN JUSTICE: by institutionalizing ADR

Numerous disadvantaged communities encounter challenges in securing their fundamental rights and gaining equitable access to justice.

LAS is actively working in these communities to spread legal awareness, promoting methods like Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) through which they can quickly and economically resolve their legal issues. As LAS aims to make the lives of the common people easier by informing them about the platforms they can pursue, it is also looking to restore their trust in the justice system.



LEGAL AWARENESS CLINICS on ADR

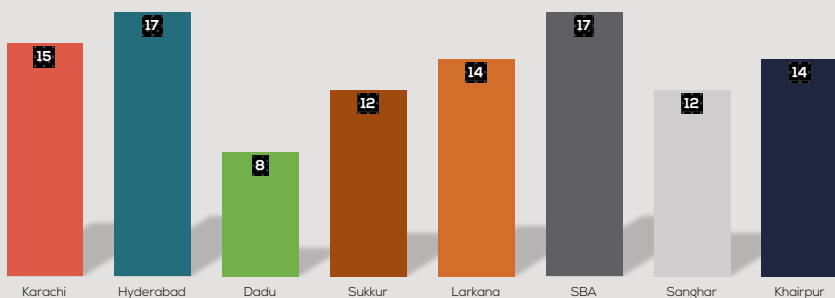
Undoubtedly, the unwavering dedication of the ADR paralegals has become a driving force for justice in Pakistan. Their exemplary work is a testament to their profound impact on their communities and the legal system at large.

As the participants were given awareness about the appropriate channels to report their cases at the relevant forums, this crucial information serves as a catalyst, empowering communities with effective tools for resolving disputes through ADR channels.

The paralegals actively partnered with field teams to facilitate the mapping and coordinating of **103 ADR sessions** within their respective communities. Their invaluable contributions reached far and wide, touching the lives of **2,656 community members**.

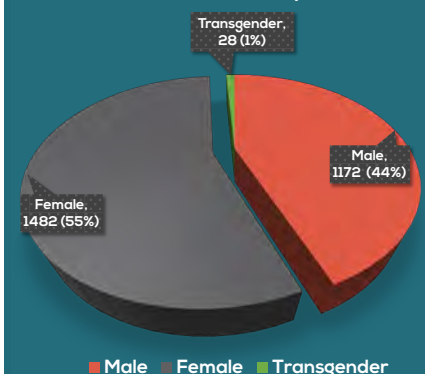
DIVERSION OF CASES towards ADR Mechanisms

During the reporting quarter, we successfully directed **119** cases in our eight designated districts toward ADR methods. Among these, males reported the highest number at 64 cases (54%), while females accounted for 55 cases (46%). Most of these cases were classified as Federal Ombudsman cases, totaling 96 instances, followed by provincial ombudsman with 5 cases, and 9 cases each in court-annexed and private mediation categories. Remarkably, out of these 8 court-annexed mediation cases, 7 were successfully resolved through mediation.



Number of cases registered in each district

Participants of Legal Awareness Clinics: Breakdown by Gender



ENABLING A ROBUST ADR ECOSYSTEM: Inauguration of Islamabad Court Annexed Mediation Centre

In recent years, ADR mechanisms have become significantly popular on a global scale in enhancing and supporting judicial systems, reducing the backlog of cases. LAS, under the leadership of Justice (R) Nasir Aslam Zahid (Chairperson, LAS), is actively engaged on both the demand and supply side fronts of ADR, collaborating with judicial and government entities to implement a sustainable ADR Eco System in Pakistan.

With the support of LAS, Islamabad High Court (IHC) and MoLJ designed and inaugurated the first Court Annexed Mediation Centre on November 28, 2023, at the Old High Court Building Islamabad.

The inauguration ceremony was blessed with the presence of esteemed judiciary members including **Chief Justice Aamer Farooq** (Islamabad High Court), **Justice Miangul Hassan Aurangzeb** (IHC), **Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kiyani** (IHC), **Justice Sardar Ejaz Ishaq Khan** (IHC), **Raja Naeem Akbar** (Secretary Law, MoLJ), and **Dr. Raheem Awan** (Director, LAJA).



This court-annexed mediation center was designed after extensive consultations with judges, litigants, and members of the legal fraternity. This Mediation Centre will provide space for conducting mediation within court premises. It will also encourage the referral of cases to mediation from the district judiciary (where the majority of pendency exists) - ultimately building the public's confidence in mediation soon.



ADR PARALEGAL REFRESHER TRAINING



The ADR interventions by LAS in Pakistan focus on establishing robust networks for sustainable ADR, enhancing its demand through community engagement, and training community paralegals in selected districts. The goal is to create a lasting impact by conducting ADR Clinics in Community ADR Networks (CANs).

A refresher training took place in the districts, including Larkana, Sukkur, Khairpur, and Dadu, to enhance paralegals' understanding of ADR mechanisms. The refresher training was attended by 124 paralegals (including 71 males, 51 females, and 2 transgenders) who had their understanding of the ADR components restored.

ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY EFFORTS to increase public awareness of ADR

Launch of Pakistan's first-ever COURT PENDENCY PREDICTIVE ANALYSIS

The current case pendency in Pakistan stands at 2.3 million cases, making implementing ADR (particularly mediation) the only viable option to address this backlog effectively. In collaboration with the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) and Musalaha International Center for Arbitration & Dispute Resolution (MICADR), LAS arranged a conference titled **"Predicting Pakistan's Case Pendency: Mediation as a Critical Reforms Agenda"** on November 07, 2023 at PIDE, Islamabad.

The conference witnessed a thought-provoking panel discussion on the need to institutionalize mediation in Pakistan. The esteemed panelists included prominent legal personalities such as **Raja Naeem Akbar** (Federal Secretary of Law), Senior management from LAS, and representatives from MCI Arb, who concluded that mediation is a viable mechanism to resolve civil and family cases and has the



potential to reduce the burden on courts while ensuring the delivery of expedient and expeditious justice through amicable, court-recognized settlements.

Justice Mansoor Ali Shah (Supreme Court of Pakistan), while delivering his keynote address, lauded the services being provided by LAS to Pakistan in creating a robust

mediation ecosystem across Sindh, Islamabad, and Gilgit Baltistan. He reiterated that although broader judicial reforms are critically required to correct the system, mediation will be beneficial in not only reducing the burden on courts but also changing the way society resolves its disputes, hence moving from an adversarial approach to a more amicable means of settlement.

Quoting a judge of the US Supreme Court, Justice Shah said:

"The courts should not be the places where the resolution of disputes begins. Rather, they should be places where the disputes are put to an end after having gone through extensive resolution platforms such as mediation."



STRENGTHENING THE SUPPLY of State-Recognized ADR across Pakistan

SENSITIZATION WORKSHOP ON MEDIATION for District Judiciary of Gilgit Baltistan

With the support of the GB Chief Court and Government, LAS is making significant strides towards making ADR, specifically mediation, a formal and effective means of resolving disputes in Gilgit Baltistan. This will not only enhance the capacity of our judicial system but will also bring us closer to a more efficient and accessible justice system for the people of this region.



In continuation of our ongoing efforts to institutionalize ADR in Gilgit Baltistan, LAS held a two-day “Sensitization Workshop on Mediation for District Judiciary of Gilgit Baltistan” on October 17-18, 2023, at GB Chief Court. The workshop was attended by 22 participants, including judges of the District Judiciary of Diamer, Chilas, Astore, Ghizer, and Hunza, as well as prosecutors and law officers.

The primary objective of this workshop was to acquaint the District Judiciary with the drafted Gilgit Baltistan Model Mediation Bill 2023, which has recently received approval from the GB Cabinet and is soon to be tabled before the GB Assembly. The successful implementation of this bill is expected to profoundly reduce court pendency and set a significant precedent for other provinces to follow.

The workshop sessions were skilfully conducted by trainers **Mr. Shahzar Illahi** (Associate Director, MICADR) and **Mr. Fahad Mehsood** (Senior Consultant, LAS). **Justice Ali Baig** (Honorable Chief Judge, GB Chief Court) also addressed the participants and acknowledged LAS’s active role in institutionalizing ADR in Gilgit Baltistan.

Speaker GBLA assures tabling of the “DRAFT GILGIT BALTISTAN MODEL MEDIATION BILL 2023” in the Assembly



LAS conducted a consultation session with the members of the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA) on “The Draft Gilgit Baltistan Model Mediation

Bill 2023” in October 2023. During this session, a significant discussion was held on the model mediation law recently passed by the GB cabinet, where all members

showed their unwavering support for implementing ADR (particularly mediation) mechanisms in civil and commercial cases.

“For decades, ADR has been practiced through informal dispute resolution forums in Gilgit Baltistan, eliminating animosity and conflicts between parties, enabling them to arrive at settlements. We wholeheartedly endorse and support the implementation of ADR through the Model Mediation Bill that will be tabled in assembly for final approval.”

~ Mr. Nazir Ahmed (Speaker, GBLA) on the occasion.



ACCREDITATION CEREMONY for Participants of Accredited Mediators Training Program of Gilgit Baltistan

With GB being a fertile land for dispute resolution through informal forums for decades, LAS has been making efforts to introduce formal dispute resolution forums in the region with the support of the GB Judiciary and government.



LAS took the initiative of introducing its first-ever accredited mediators training program in Gilgit Baltistan earlier in May 2023, which included members of Tanzeem Ahle Sunnat, Imamia Shariah Board, Aga Khan Conciliation and Arbitration Board, lawyers from the district bar Gilgit, and members of local support organizations. In continuation of this training, the accreditation ceremony for 34 successful mediators was held at Avari Xpress in Hotel Gilgit

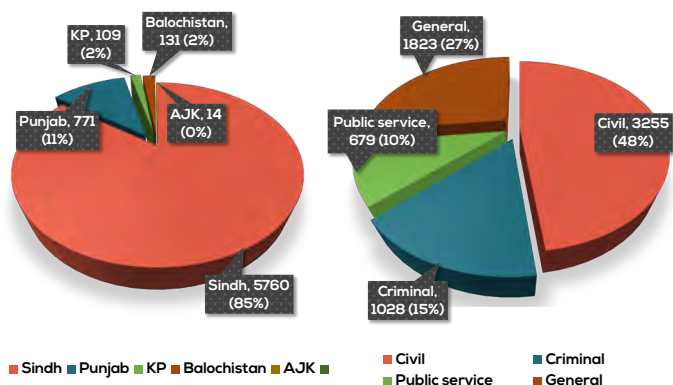
In light of the same **Justice Ali Baig** (Honorable Chief Judge, GB Chief Court) and **Mr. Raheem Gul** (Law Secretary, Gilgit Baltistan) distributed IMI-certified mediation certificates amongst the successful mediators on October 19, 2023. These accredited mediators will be notified by the accreditation committee/GB Chief Court, and will formally become part of the ADR landscape in Gilgit Baltistan.

Speaking at the accreditation Ceremony, **Justice Ali Baig** congratulated all participants and offered space to LAS & MICADR to open an office in the currently under-construction Gilgit Baltistan Judicial Academy. He further proposed establishing an ADR forum/office in every division of Gilgit Baltistan to foster out-of-court settlements of appropriate civil and commercial disputes to reduce court pendency in Gilgit Baltistan.



EMPOWERING CITIZENS THROUGH THE SINDH LEGAL ADVISORY CALL CENTRE (Toll-free number: 0800-70806) - a public-private partnership between the Government of Sindh and the Legal Aid Society

The Sindh Legal Advisory Call Center (SLACC) is a flagship project of the Legal Aid Society and the Government of Sindh. SLACC is Pakistan's first and one-of-a-kind toll-free helpline, which through its Interactive Voice Recording (IVRT) system has amassed an impressive record of 430,379 calls during the reporting quarter, encompassing a diverse range of 222,377 queries registered from more than 450 cities across Pakistan, all successfully addressed and resolved.



During this last quarter, SLACC registered **6,785 queries**. This quarter's statistics reveal that 77% of queries originated from male callers, while 23% came from female callers, with an additional 7 calls from individuals who identified their gender as 'Other.'

The SLACC continues to maintain the highest service quality and efficiency levels, recently undergoing a hardware and software upgrade with the Avaya system. Furthermore, regular steps are taken for the capacity building of its advocates, ensuring that up-to-date legal knowledge is shared with callers.

Use of AI for quicker facilitation

A prototype chatbot was created to respond to legal queries in a move towards greater digitalization. Titled SLACCBOT, this new initiative will complement SLACC and make justice accessible 24/7 using Artificial Intelligence (AI), along with the knowledge base SLACC has been generating since its inception.

Currently, the prototype bot is fully capable of responding to queries related to cybercrime and guiding the person to SLACC's call center number. However, this user testing phase has provided key insights that will aid in improving the bot as part of the larger project to create an all-encompassing SLACCBOT that will be capable of handling questions related to 200 sub-areas of law.



FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS with key stakeholders



Integration of the CHIEF SECRETARY'S COMPLAINT CELL

The integration of the Sindh Chief Secretary's Complaint Cell with SLACC was officiated by **Mr. Mohammed Omer Soomro** (Minister for Law, Religious Affairs, and Human Rights Department, GoS) on November 01, 2023. This marked a pivotal step towards expediting the resolution of public service and administrative complaints identified during the process of delivering legal advice to the callers, thereby facilitating the people of Sindh.

This strategic integration is designed to create a seamless experience for citizens in addressing issues they face in their daily lives. These concerns may

include complaints about public officials' performance, reporting illegal constructions, and addressing challenges related to drinking water in their local areas.

With the official launch of the integrated system, **Mr. Soomro** ceremoniously uploaded the first

complaint from SLACC onto the integrated portal, paving the way for a new era of faster grievance resolution. The ceremony was attended by **Justice Arif H. Khilji** (Chief Legal Advisor, SLACC), **Barrister Haya Emaan Zahid** (CEO, LAS), and officials from the Chief Secretary's Complaint Cell.

Since then, 21 complaints have been added to the portal, of which 3 have been resolved, 3 are in the resolution process, and the remaining 15 have been sent to the relevant departments.

TRAININGS at the SLACC



A training was conducted on Afghan refugees' rights and current issues on November 24, 2023, by **Sikander Mehmood** (Representative, Society for Human Rights and Prisoners Aid) (SHARP). Mr. Mehmood explained how to handle calls related to Afghan refugees and how their rights can be protected.

He further explained the UNHCR and IOM's mandate in Pakistan and the process of asylum cases and documentation for Afghans in Pakistan. Furthermore, the training disclosed covered major legal issues faced by Afghans, including civil documentation, child registration, and access to services.



Advocate Bassam Dahri (Litigation Specialist, LAS) conducted a series of two training sessions for the legal advisors at SLACC on October 11-18, 2023.

The capacity-building sessions covered the topics of Employment and Criminal Laws, providing a refresher to the SLACC advisors on existing laws, recent changes, and further developments in Laws – information that will ultimately be passed on to callers who request legal assistance in such matters.



Following the integration of the Chief Secretary's Complaint Portal with SLACC, a follow-up refresher training was conducted on November 22, 2023, by **Mr. Tahir Ali Memon** (Senior Data Processing Officer, SGA&CD Department, GoS). The training helped re-align the SLACC lawyers on registering and sharing public service complaints onto the portal, ensuring that they remain fully prepared to handle relevant legal complaints coming in from the SLACC helpline.



Given the significant emotional nature of the stress calls received by our legal advisors at SLACC, a mental wellness workshop was conducted by a team from **RUHBARU** on November 07, 2023. The workshop focused on stress management, signs of good mental health and mindfulness, and fostering a positive discussion amongst the advocates participating.

Speak to a qualified & high-court registered lawyer - TOLL FREE number:

0800 - 70806



ENSURING RIGHTS & ACCESS TO JUSTICE

for Religious Minorities

LAS strives for the sociolegal empowerment of marginalized communities in the province of Sindh by providing access to justice and legal support to those who need it most. This support is achieved through the provision of free-of-cost litigation services, arranging awareness sessions, and holding mobilization meetings across eight districts of Sindh, namely Karachi, Hyderabad, Larkana, Dadu, Sukkur, Sanghar, Khairpur, and Shaheed Benazir Abad.



PROVINCIAL DIALOGUE on the future of District Peace Committees in Sindh

Recognizing the need for a community-level response, District Peace Committees (DPCs) were established across Pakistan, following successful international and national models. Under Deputy Commissioners' jurisdiction, these committees aim to maintain religious harmony and peace. However, an analysis of DPCs in eight districts of Sindh in 2023 depicts several issues, including the absence of a robust legal framework, undefined Terms of Reference (TORs), limited focus on reforms and inclusivity, and lack of female representation, and inadequate religious minority representation.



As there is an urgent need for the institutionalization of (DPCs), LAS collaborated with the Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC) and the Auqaf & Religious Affairs Department, Zakat & Ushr Department to organize a provincial dialogue focusing on the future of DPC in Sindh on October 5, 2023, at Marriott Hotel in Karachi.

The event brought together prominent figures, including **Barrister Muhammad Omer Soomro** (Minister for Law, Religious Affairs, and Human Rights), **Mr. Iqbal Ahmed Detho** (Chairperson, Sindh Human Rights Commission), and **Justice Arif Hussain Khilji** (Chief Legal Advisor, LAS).



During the dialogue, **Barrister Omer Soomro** commended LAS's research efforts and acknowledged the mandate of DPCs. He further expressed his concerns about the current challenges to the ideology of peace and stressed the significant role that the DPCs could play in addressing these challenges and promoting peace nationwide.

FOSTERING COLLABORATIONS for Strengthening Human Rights Advocacy



Collaborative Efforts for Peace and Justice

To fortify the safeguarding of rights and to augment the efficacy of District-level vigilance committees and fact-finding bodies, LAS presented a comprehensive overview of the significant collaborative initiative undertaken by the Honorable Commissioner Hyderabad, the Sindh Human Rights Commission, and the Civil Society Support Program.



The core objectives of this gathering centered around fostering heightened collaboration and coordination among diverse stakeholders. This recent assembly delved into critical facets of Peace and Justice, focusing on upholding fundamental rights, particularly among vulnerable communities and minorities. The day witnessed eminent personnel in attendance, including **Mr. Iqbal Ahmed Detho** (Chairperson, Sindh Human Rights Commission), **Mr. Noor Mohammad Bajeer** (CEO, CSSP), **Syed Khalid Hyder Shah** (Commissioner of

Hyderabad), **Mr. Tarique Dharejo** (D.I.G., Hyderabad) legal luminaries, and representatives from civil society, who shared valuable insights on identifying gaps and strengthening the peace vigilance committees.

The meeting concluded with a collective commitment to elevate coordination for the facilitation, enforcement, and execution of laws. While all stakeholders expressed their dedication to fortifying referral and protection mechanisms.



TRAINING FOR STAFF MEMBERS of the Human Rights Department

LAS administered a comprehensive three-day training session for the newly appointed staff members of the Human Rights Department's Complaint Cell. Spearheaded by **Advocate Shabnaz Wali** (Research Coordinator, LAS), the training aimed at equipping the staff with an in-depth understanding of laws pertaining to minority communities, child rights, women's rights, and various other human rights enshrined in domestic legislative instruments.

The imparted knowledge during this training will undoubtedly enhance the Complaint Cell Staff's ability to address and resolve complaints from members of religious minorities more effectively. By promoting awareness and understanding, we aim to contribute to a more inclusive and rights-centric approach with the Human Rights Department.

CELEBRATING PROGRESS: Landmark Step with Sindh Hindu Marriage Act 2018 Amendment Implementation!



The recent enactment of the Sindh Hindu Marriage Act 2018 amendment marks a historic stride, and we are delighted to announce the commendable steps taken by the Local Government in its implementation.

Under the guidance of the Regional Director, a directive has been issued to all Union Councils, Union Committees, and Town Offices spanning the Division (Sukkur, Khairpur, and Ghotki) to ensure the effective implementation of the provisions outlined in the Bill. One particular note is the instruction to register Pandits and Mukhis as Marriage Registrars in their respective jurisdictions. These individuals will soon be officially registered with their respective Union Councils.



This monumental move, driven by LAS, comes to fruition following the proactive response to a recent letter from the Sindh Human Rights Commission. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those involved and look forward to witnessing further progress in fostering a society that values and protects the rights of all its members.

SUPPORTING SINDH GOVERNMENT'S INITIATIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS DAY: A Step Towards GBV Prevention

We were pleased to participate in the Sindh Government's noteworthy endeavors in commemorating Human Rights Day as part of the Sindh People's Housing for Flood Affectees (SPHF) project. The culminating event focused on developing referral pathways for addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and its prevention.

The event witnessed active participation from several key stakeholders, including the Women Development Department, Women Protection Cell of Sindh Police, Sindh Child Authority, Nari Foundation, Sindh Human

Rights Commission, and SRSO. At the event, the LAS team presented a comprehensive overview of GBV frameworks, specifically tailored to the context of the Sindh province.

These collective efforts exemplify the Sindh government's and diverse stakeholders' commitment to addressing GBV and championing the importance of human rights. At the same time, LAS commends these proactive initiatives and looks forward to witnessing continued progress in the shared pursuit of promoting human rights and eradicating Gender-Based Violence.



Protecting and Promoting RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Nurturing a society with religious freedom and harmony is no longer a dream but a vision that will soon become reality.

In order to support and uplift religious minority communities in Sindh and South Punjab and to foster an environment of religious harmony, LAS is partnering with

Aahung, the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), and the Roshni Welfare Organization (Roshni).

In this context, LAS conducted a comprehensive project orientation of this new groundbreaking initiative at the Movenpick Hotel, Karachi, on November 21, 2023, which

marked the beginning of a journey towards religious inclusivity with the signing of MoUs. On this occasion, all implementing partners mutually agreed on specific tasks and activities to be carried out for the efficacious implementation of this collaboration.



16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM Campaign



Violence against women remains a grave human rights violation globally, presenting life-threatening health and protection challenges. In Pakistan, a staggering 32% of women have faced such violence (UNFPA 2022). Acknowledging the severity of this issue, LAS takes crucial steps to reduce such heinous acts through the provision of legal awareness via its free legal advice and assistance.

LAS administered the 16 Days of Activism campaign via our on-field interventions and social media mainstreams to call for preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls. Our field advocates, officers, and paralegals sensitized students and teachers at local schools in Sindh to various types of violence, including the unjust denial of property shares.

On International Human Rights Day (December 10, 2023), the LAS team in Larkana conducted a community awareness session during the campaign. Stressing 'No Excuse to Violence,' the community members were empowered with knowledge about the various forms of violence against women and children. They were also given awareness about available avenues for assistance, with LAS playing a crucial role.

This session aimed to amplify the collective fight against violence.

Recognizing the power of art and unity, the participants channeled their creativity into poster-making to condemn violence against women and children. Each poster emerges as a catalyst for change, illustrating a collective vision for a future liberated from violence.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

LAS is dedicated to its mission of enhancing access to justice for survivors and victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) by strengthening the capacity of critical actors within the Criminal Justice System (CJS) to address and appropriately respond to sexual violence across the country.

Conference on the Government of Sindh's Initiatives for Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence: **SUCCESS AND WAY FORWARD**

Sindh witnessed an increase in conviction rate for rape cases from 5% in 2020 to 13% in 2022, as reported by the Office of the Prosecutor General, Sindh. This increase in conviction rates is the direct outcome of a series of policy and process reforms spearheaded by the Government of Sindh through a Multi-Sectoral Coordination Committee across the Criminal Justice System.

LAS organized the conference on the Government of Sindh's Initiatives for Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence: Successes and Way Forward on December 4, 2023, in collaboration with UNFPA and Home Department GoS to showcase this significant improvement. LAS presented findings from its case analysis, which indicated an improved understanding of the use and limitations of DNA and medical evidence, refusal to accept compromise as grounds for acquittals, increased use of digital evidence, and the solitary statement of the victims being recognized as the most critical evidence.



The conference brought together all actors involved in improving the state's response to sexual and gender-based violence in the criminal justice system and collated all their efforts that contributed to a collective success. The conference was graced by the presence of

Brigadier Haris Nawaz (Minister for Home & Prisons, GoS), **Dr. Saad Khalid Niaz** (Health Minister, GoS), **Mr. Ahmed Ali Baloch** (Secretary, Law, Parliamentary Affairs, and Criminal Prosecution Department, GoS), **Mr. Faizullah Korejo PSP** (DIG Training), **Ms. Suhai Aziz** (AIGP Establishment),

Dr. Summaiya Tariq (Chief Police Surgeon, JPMC), **Dr. Luay Shabneh** (Country Representative, UNFPA), **Justice Arif H. Khilji** (Chief Legal Advisor LAS), Consul General of Qatar, Deputy High Commissioner of the British High Commission, and members of the US Consulate.



You can catch the highlights of the day by clicking (in case of a softcopy) or by scanning this QR code.



GBV GUIDELINES LAUNCH EVENT

The provision of guidelines on Gender-Based Violence together with the health sector training sessions were administered by LAS in Karachi, Matiari, and Qambar Shahdadkot with significant support from the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA). Its Launch Event was organized at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Karachi.



The event was graced with the participation of key stakeholders from the criminal justice system who provided their insights on the issue of SGBV and how the health sector plays its role in responding to and referring SGBV cases, as it is the first point of contact for a survivor.

With a diverse set of experts, including **Dr. Ayesha Mehnaz** (Chairperson, Konpal - Child Abuse Prevention Society), **Dr. Fehmina Arif** (Professor, Department of Pediatrics, Dow University of Health Sciences), **Dr. Beenish Hameed** (Consultant & Supervisor Emergency Medicine, SMBBIT), **Dr. Asha Bedar** (Clinical Psychologist), **Dr. Shazia Jabbar** (Consultant

Gynaecologist, Dow University of Health Sciences), and **Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmed** (Incharge, Sindh Forensic DNA Lab, ICCBS) as panelists, moderated by **Dr. Summaiya Tariq** (Chief Police Surgeon, JPMC), the event shed light the current status of health sector's response to sexual and gender-based violence and how these guidelines are a step towards improvement.

Dr. Saad Khalid Niaz (Health Minister, GoS), as the chief guest, highlighted the inhumane nature of SGBV in light of Fatima Furiro's case, highly condemning child sexual abuse and how a society should collectively work towards preventing such heinous criminal acts.

Consultation Session for the IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE RESTRAINT ACT 2013 through Departmental Roadmaps

LAS, in collaboration with the Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC) and with the support of the United Nations Populations Fund, conducted a consultation session on the departmental roadmaps we created for the implementation of the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013 on December 21, 2023.



The purpose of the session was to address the issue of child marriage and formulate a comprehensive plan for its eradication. Chaired by **Mr. Muhammad Omer Soomro** (Minister for Law, Religious Affairs, and Human Rights Department, GoS), the day brought together key departments and stakeholders with the objective of developing

short-term, immediate, and long-term strategies for the precise and measured elimination of child marriage.

This initiative was prompted by concerning statistics revealing that nearly 31% of all marriages in Pakistan involve at least one spouse below the age of 18. Disturbingly,

in rural Sindh, girls are over twice as likely to get married before 16 as compared to their urban counterparts. On the occasion, the Law Minister pledged to address pending laws and policies, set realistic milestones for the capacity of targeted groups, and obtain statistics from all relevant departments.

Joint Training on **CLINICAL MANAGEMENT OF RAPE CASES AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK** of Key Justice System Actors

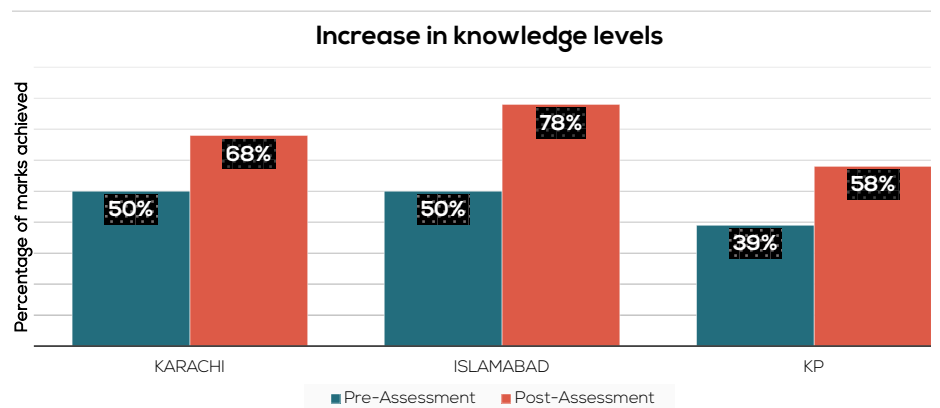


The systematic gaps in the criminal justice system, owing to a lack of prioritization and resources for the management of sexual violence cases, demand enhanced coordination between the key actors and extensive training on the updated legal and medical interventions pertinent to GBV response.

In this context, LAS held a series of two-day training sessions on **'Clinical Management of Rape Cases and Performance Management Framework'** for medico-legal officers, casualty medical officers, police investigation officers, and prosecutors hailing from Islamabad, Karachi, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from November 15 to 28, 2023. The training sessions were moderated by **Dr. Summaiya Syed-Tariq** (Chief Police Surgeon, JPMC) - who is an expert in the field of forensic

medicine and a member of the Special Committee under section 15 of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 formed by the Ministry of Law and Justice.

The training methodology was a mix of seminar-based, interactive, and demonstrative sessions to ensure conceptual clarity, a better understanding of the regional context, and learning from and building on the prevalent best practices.



Above is a representation of the knowledge increase recorded at these training sessions.

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Training of Healthcare Providers on **CLINICAL MANAGEMENT OF RAPE CASES**



In addition to the joint training sessions for criminal justice system actors, LAS also held a series of one-day 'Training of Healthcare Providers on Clinical Management of Rape Cases' for doctors who fall within the referral pathway for survivors and victims of gender-based violence, or belonged to hospital administrations hailing from

Islamabad, Karachi, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

These trainings were held from November 17 to 29, 2023, and used a mixed-method approach, with discussions on improving the referral system and secondary care services, considering the regional practices and realities.

Health Sector Training on **GBV GUIDELINES TO STRENGTHEN RESPONSE TO SURVIVORS**



The health sector plays a pivotal role in identifying, responding to, and referring GBV cases, as survivors often seek medical care. Hence, there's an urgent need to capacitate healthcare professionals to appropriately respond to cases of GBV in Pakistan as the first line of support.

In this context, LAS trained healthcare professionals in Karachi, Matiari, Qambar Shahdadkot, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The training reported a remarkable increase in knowledge levels of participants, that is, 47% in Qambar Shahdadkot, 78% in Karachi, 61% in Matiari, and 52% in Gilgit-Baltistan about protocols related to identification and response to victims of GBV.



Training Sessions of Lady Health Workers on **SENSITIZATION AND REFERRALS OF S&GBV CASES**

Lady Health Workers (LHW) are essential in identifying SGBV cases as they have significant trust and access to the communities due to door-to-door interactions.

LAS conducted training sessions for LHWs to strengthen the referral of SGBV cases. The training aimed to establish effective and efficient referral and response mechanisms to facilitate the SGBV survivors' access to justice institutions for quick and effective remedies through case referrals.

These training sessions took place in Matiari, Qambar Shahdad Kot, and Karachi. They will further support LAS in strengthening its connection with the affectees and Lady Health Workers.

Closing the Gap between Law, Policy, and Practice on WOMEN'S RIGHT TO PROPERTY

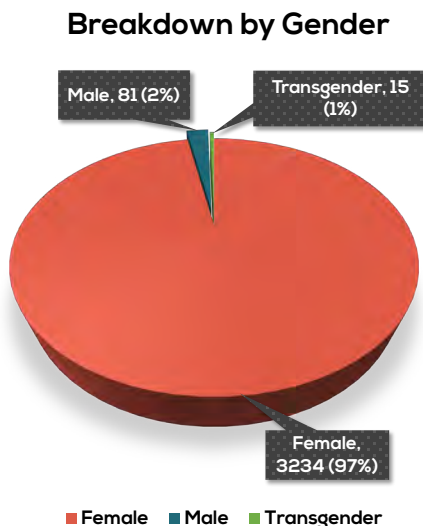
The importance of the right to property underscores as a constitutional entitlement for every woman, fostering economic empowerment and decision-making.

LEGAL EDUCATION AND AWARENESS Clinics

Community awareness sessions remained pivotal in providing community members with vital information and education on women's rights issues that resonate with their daily lives. Through these sessions, our paralegals dispensed critical legal information, and acted as active channels for relaying data and community concerns back to LAS.

During this intervention cycle, **246 legal awareness sessions** on Women's property rights were administered, through which 3,330 individuals benefitted. These sessions have served as essential platforms for educating and raising awareness among community members.

Beyond the immediate impact of community awareness sessions, there is a notable cascading effect within communities. Empowered women, having gained knowledge through the sessions, are becoming advocates, spreading awareness, and influencing others. This organic growth underscores the sustainability and community-driven nature of the intervention.



PARALEGAL REFRESHER TRAINING SESSION in Karachi

A two-day Paralegal Refresher Session was conducted in Karachi on December 18-19, 2023, with the participation of 28 (including 7 new) paralegals. The comprehensive training was led by field advocates with discussions and briefing paralegals on their roles and responsibilities.

Participants actively acquired the legal knowledge and skills necessary for organizing and leading community awareness sessions. With a focus on the potential inclusion of conditions in the Nikahnama to ensure women's financial security, the training compelled discussions on challenges encountered in the field, addressing concerns about institutional hurdles for women in obtaining essential identification documents.

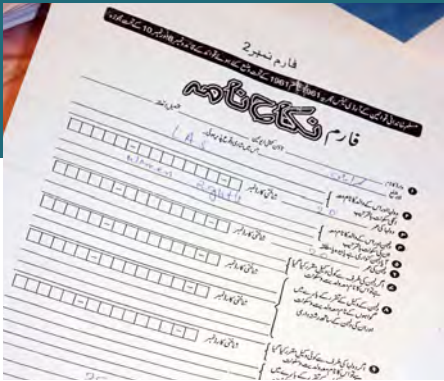
As the training featured individual presentations and mock sessions aimed to improve presentation skills, it concluded with a collective commitment from all



paralegals to disseminate knowledge regarding access to property rights and social security schemes in their respective communities.

IMPROVING THE UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS under the Muslim Family Laws

Women in Pakistan face various obstacles when it comes to accessing equitable rights in marriages and implementation of conditions decided in the Nikahnama. The lack of awareness of Muslim Family Laws (MFL), as well as the often-overlooked clauses in the Nikahnama, make women vulnerable to inequalities that limit their ability to assert their rights and protections.



ADDRESSING QUERIES RELATED TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS in the Nikahnama

In a proactive step toward advancing women's rights and protections, LAS recently conducted a targeted training session for the on-call lawyers at SLACC. The training was led by **Advocate Muhammad Rashid Mahar** (Field Advocate, LAS) to deepen the lawyers' knowledge of pertinent laws under MFL in Sindh. This initiative sought to equip the lawyers with the necessary insights to address queries related to women's rights within the MFL framework and the specific rights outlined in the Nikahnama.

The training introduced key legislations governing Muslim family matters in Sindh and discussed pivotal statutes, including the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939, the Muslim Family Laws

Ordinance 1961, the Family Courts Act 1964, Family Courts Rules 1965, Dowry & Bridal Gifts (Restriction) Act 1976, the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act 2013, and the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Rules 2016.

The overarching objective of this training was to ensure that lawyers at SLACC are well-versed in current legislation, enabling them to effectively respond to queries concerning individuals' rights under MFL and the nuances encapsulated in the Nikahnama. By fostering a deeper understanding of these legal frameworks, SLACC lawyers are better positioned to provide informed guidance and advocacy for those seeking assistance in family matters.



PROMOTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE NIKAHNAMA with Paralegals

Recognizing the urgent need to fill this knowledge gap, LAS has successfully trained 75 paralegals from Karachi, Larkana, and Shaheed Benazirabad, who are now equipped with the expertise to guide women through the complexities of laws relating to Muslim marriages and families and ensure women's access to privileges granted under the Nikahnama.

These paralegals serve as beacons of support for women in need. Their training not only enhances their understanding of the law but also establishes them as valuable resources within their communities. With 75 paralegals linked to their communities, they will soon enlighten the married-to-be and married Muslim women on the clauses of the Nikahnama and the processes described under Muslim Family Laws (MFL).



PROTECTING CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

The Legal Aid Society joined forces with the International Organization for Migration (UN IOM) in February 2023 for "Safeguarding and Enhancing Access to Civil Documentation for Flood-Affected Population in Sindh." The interventions resulting from this partnership were implemented in the flood-affected districts of Dadu, Sanghar, Shaheed Benazirabad, Khairpur, and Umerkot. This collaboration aimed to address the urgent needs of the local population regarding civil documentation and legal support by providing vital assistance to the communities severely affected by the devastating floods of 2022.



LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO FLOOD AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

A service delivery phase was initiated earlier this year through which LAS aimed to undertake the cases of the most vulnerable individuals and have them resolved with the respective institutions/offices such as NADRA / Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and the like.

Through this initiative, **over 600 cases** of individuals have already been taken up thus far, enabling the people to exercise their citizenship rights and access state-sponsored financial assistance - if they are eligible.

One-day CAPACITY STRENGTHENING DIALOGUES



A series of one-day Capacity Strengthening Dialogues was organized for the members of civil society in the five abovementioned districts during the reporting quarter. In November 2023, two follow-up Capacity Strengthening Dialogues were organized in Sanghar and Shaheed Benazirabad.

The way forward to establish a coordinated response

mechanism for protecting the civil documentation of the affected population was thoroughly discussed during these dialogues. All stakeholders expressed their keen interest in collaborating with other departments and developing a standardized mechanism that safeguards civil documentation during disasters and emergencies. A total of **225 stakeholders** have been engaged thus far as a result of this intervention.

JUSTICE SUCCESS STORIES

Empowering women to survive through the Government's financial support programs

In 2007, the Federal Ombudsman (FO) started an online complaint management system through a mobile application that connected approximately 180 government agencies and 14 regional offices. From then on, people could easily resolve their CNIC issues, excess and late billing of electricity and gas bills, and avail financial assistance through government departments by filing their complaints before the federal ombudsman. Playing its part in bringing awareness regarding such relief platforms in Sindh, LAS disperses information to the public via its legal awareness clinics.

Ms. Asma Fatima, a resident of district Larkana, was deprived of the financial assistance that she had been receiving from the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) since 2011 due to a change in

government policy. Ms. Asma, who had no other source of income, visited the BISP regional office to renew her stipend but could not have her issue resolved. After trying for a year and a half, she learned to file an online complaint through one of LAS's legal awareness clinics.

Through the facilitation of the LAS field team, Asma successfully filed an online complaint at the Federal Ombudsman portal. Due to which, she was able to renew her lifelong financial assistance from BISP within a few days.

With LAS's assistance, Asma was able to narrate her issue to the regional office staff of FO, where the representative of the agency also attended the hearing. According to the agency report, BISP's Management Information System (MIS) has checked her

record and observed that her stipend was stopped due to a delay in the dynamic eligibility survey. Later Asma's socio-economic status was rechecked, after which the BISP marked her eligible for a monthly stipend of PKR 3,000.



Ms. Asma after receiving financial assistance from BISP

JUSTICE SUCCESS STORIES

Ending an 11-year-long struggle to correct CNIC

Khadim Hussain, a daily wage laborer, struggled to have his CNIC corrected for the last 11 years. He has been visiting the NADRA offices along with his documentation, including his school leaving certificate, his father's death certificate, among other relevant documents where his father's name was correctly mentioned.

Despite making multiple requests and following proper procedures, the regional NADRA staff at Shaheed Benazir Abad (SBA) did not resolve his issue. Instead, he was asked to file suit before the Honorable senior civil court for a decree/declaration from the Court of Law. Being a daily worker in a tea shop, Khadim couldn't bear advocate fees and

court expenses. Delay in correction of CNIC hampered him from availing government facilities and posed hurdles in traveling as well. After trying for years, he recently learned about LAS field team facilitation in resolving the maladministration of government departments through Federal and Provincial Ombudsmen.

After completing the necessary procedures, LAS' field team in SBA lodged an online complaint at the Federal Ombudsman (FO) portal. Furthermore, the FO noticed the matter and gave directions to NADRA. After which, his issue was resolved within 5 working days. Mr. Khadim Hussain had his CNIC revised successfully with the correct father's name, and appreciated the



support of LAS for its assistance.

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES for sharing insights across borders

CELEBRATING THE JOURNEY OF WOMEN FROM ASIA PACIFIC

To celebrate the Journey: The Legacy of Accountability, the International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), in collaboration with Partners for Law in Development (PLD) India, and Forum for Women Law and Development (FWLD) Nepal, hosted an international event. The gathering brought together feminists and inter-generational activists who have worked, learned, and contributed to society across the Asia Pacific.

LAS was honored to participate in this international forum held in Nepal, with **Ms. Rukhsana Parveen Khokhar** (Senior Project Manager, LAS) nominated by IWRAP AP. The event provided a platform to discuss the current challenges faced by women and explore ways to instill resilience within society. Ms. Rukhsana also shared research reports developed by LAS with **Shanthi Dairiam** (Founder, IWRAP-AP) and discussed the issues faced by women belonging to Religious Minority Communities in Pakistan.



SUB-REGIONAL FEMINIST LEGAL EXCHANGE CONVENING

Ms. Safia Lakho (Legal Oversight and Quality Assurance Officer, LAS) played a significant role in the Sub-regional Feminist Legal Exchange Convening held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on November 18-20, 2023. Her participation marked significant importance as she led a discussion on legal aid support and emerging issues.

During the event, Safia emphasized her commitment to addressing crucial legal matters related to justice and equality. She shed light on critical issues such as International Advocacy, the elimination of the Two-Finger test, cases of S&GBV (Sexual and Gender-Based Violence), and forced conversions. Safia utilized the platform to draw attention to cases like the Fatima Furriri case on the global stage, contributing to the advancement of justice internationally. Safia



also highlighted the role of social media in amplifying key messages and fostering continued dialogues. She actively engaged with International Human Rights activists, advocating for the need to address these pressing legal issues at the forum.


10TH ASIA DEMOCRACY NETWORK

Ms. Sana Sharif (Program Manager) participated in the 10th Asia Democracy Network (ADN) Assembly held in Bangkok, Thailand, on November 21-22, 2023, to honor a decade of unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights in Asia. The assembly aimed to draw upon

the accumulated wisdom of a decade of advocacy, reflect on the path ahead, engage in insightful discussions, share experiences, and seek inspiration to fortify their commitment to democracy in Asia. Moreover, the event focused on enhancing alliances through strategic networking, using collective wisdom and innovative ideas.



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