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Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal Aid in Pakistan

Syed Muhammad Touqeer Alam

Department of Law, Dadabhoy Institute of Higher Education, Pakistan

Email: syedtouqeeralam690@gmail.com

Dr. Tansif Ur Rehman

Teaching Associate, Department of Sociology, University of Karachi, Pakistan
and Visiting Faculty, Department of Law, Dadabhoy Institute of Higher
Education, Pakistan

Email: tansif@live.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5454-2150>

Abstract

The Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) play an essential role in provision of free legal services in Pakistan especially to marginalized and vulnerable populations. Through these agencies, there is a narrowing of the gap between the citizens and the traditional justice system by creating legal awareness, counseling, and court representation. CBOS work at the grassroots level where they address the quarrels within the community and provide legal literacy to the community. NGOs like the Legal Aid Society and AGHS Legal Aid Cell have the mandates of addressing issues of women's rights, juvenile justice, and human rights abuse. INGOs facilitate these efforts by providing their funding, technical support, and lobbying for legal reforms that are in tandem with the international standards. If combined, these organizations facilitate access to justice, decrease the number of cases in a backlog, and implement changes in the legal system. They play a vital role in a nation where the state does not provide legal assistance, and in most cases, it is not affordable to people experiencing poverty.

Keywords: CBOs, NGOs, INGOs, Legal Aid, Pakistan

Introduction

Access to justice is a right that is basic to human beings and the basis of a just and

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democratic society. In Pakistan, however, poverty, illiteracy, the lack of awareness, and a complex system of the judiciary are a major impediment that affects a considerable number of the population in the country in order to seek legal support (Sachdeva, 2023). Article 37(d) of the Constitutional provisions of Pakistan devotes the responsibility of the state to rendering legal assistance, but such assistance is not common, it is mis-funded and lacks effectiveness. In this case, the Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Islam et al., 2023), and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) have emerged as key players in minimizing the justice gap, particularly in marginalized communities, such as women, children, minorities, and low-income groups (Li & Harji, 2025).

CBOs are deployed to the grassroots level where they offer basic legal education and conflict resolution services at the community level (Nazim, 2023). Formal legal assistance services provided by local and national NGOs include legal advice, court advocacy, public interest litigation, and capacity building of legal practitioners (Uwamusi, 2025). INGOs are complementing because they give financial support, international experience, policy promotion, and observation of human rights (Minow, 2022).

Such institutions often engage in liaisons with the bar councils, law practitioners, and government agencies to promote justice sector reforms and development of awareness on the legal rights of citizens (Partha et al., 2024). These have helped them penetrate underserved areas that are usually overlooked by the state systems via mobile legal aid clinics, helplines, awareness initiatives, as well as partnerships with legal institutions (Uwamusi, 2025). The NGOs, CBOs, and INGOs have played a significant role in ensuring that justice has become more accessible, just, and human in the evolving legal landscape in Pakistan (Islam et al., 2023).

Research Justification

Free legal aid is a vital practice of equal access to justice particularly in a nation

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like Pakistan where the socio-economic disparity keeps a section of the citizens out of accessing legal redress. Despite the constitutional and international requirements, the state matters with regard to the legal assistance in Pakistan is not adequate and is not offered to a considerable part of the population. The result of this gap is the rise of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) that are currently striving to fulfill the legal needs on the grassroots and institutional level.

This research is justified by the value and role of such organizations in the process of the provision of legal aid, promotion of legal literacy, and protection of vulnerable populations. However, there is a lack of academic and policy-based writing that critically examines the role, problems, and activities of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in this sector in the Pakistani context. In an attempt to highlight their significance in the provision and legal empowerment, this study attempts to highlight their approaches, achievements, and limitations. Moreover, the collaborative potential of these organizations and the state can be studied to give hints on how a more inclusive, coordinated, and sustainable legal aid system can be developed. This study can therefore advise policymakers, legal practitioners, as well as development actors on how legal aid systems can be strengthened in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in providing free legal aid in Pakistan.
2. To highlight the theoretical context of the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in providing free legal aid in Pakistan.
3. To analyze the laws regarding the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in providing free legal aid in Pakistan.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in providing free legal aid in Pakistan.

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5. To explore the opportunities for the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in providing free legal aid in Pakistan.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigor, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

One of the important elements of the rule of law is access to justice, which has been

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extensively covered in both the international and national literature (Islam et al., 2023). Mauro Cappelletti and Bryant Garth, and others have stressed that legal aid is a democratizing factor in access to the legal system. Legal aid offered by the state, however, is still frail in the Pakistani context, with the reports by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Legal Aid Society (LAS) shedding some light on it (Minow, 2022). These reports highlight the systemic problems, including insufficient funding, delays in the work process, and inadequate access to isolated and marginalized communities (Uwamusi, 2025).

It has been noted in literature that Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) are likely to provide services that are more effective in the area of legal awareness and mediation, due to their grassroots involvement and cultural knowledge, which is done by these groups operating at the local level (Minow, 2022). According to a study carried out by the Aurat Foundation (2018), CBOs were important in solving the legal problems affecting women (Li & Harji, 2025), especially in matters of domestic violence and inheritance rights (Islam et al., 2023).

NGOs like AGHS Legal Aid Cell and the Legal Aid Society have been widely reported to have been on the frontline in terms of providing legal services, setting up legal aid clinics, and conducting community-level awareness (Sachdeva, 2023). Their practice is usually mentioned as an example of rights-based provision of legal aid. Legal empowerment programs have been funded and enabled in Pakistan by international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Open Society Foundations (Nazim, 2023), which have targeted gender justice, juvenile justice, and legal reforms (Islam et al., 2023).

Along with their beneficial effect, the literature identifies such shortcomings as coordination gaps between stakeholders (Sachdeva, 2023), reliance on donor funding, and absence of regulatory frameworks of NGOs and INGOs (Chudyk, 2023). Moreover, there

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are also academic critiques that suggest more coordinated strategies to connect the work of civil society with state justice institutions (Islam et al., 2023).

Historical Context of the Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal Aid in Pakistan

The constitutional demands of free legal aid and the civil society role, especially in Pakistan, have been experienced in history (Chudyk, 2023). Even though Article 37(d) of the Constitution of Pakistan requires cheap and fast justice, the limited role of the state in legal assistance was practiced decades ago (Islam et al., 2023). The presence of this critical vacuum on the state level was filled by players of the civil society when the latter was weak, particularly since the 1980s (Nazim, 2023).

The Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) were formed during the 80s and 90s, and the human rights and legal empowerment were formed at the grassroots level (Sachdeva, 2023). They were also among the earliest organizations that addressed both local disputes and legal matters of women, especially in rural areas (Uwamusi, 2025). Meanwhile, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like AGHS Legal Aid Cell (founded by Asma Jahangir) began offering legal services to the victims of human rights violations, focusing on women, children, and prisoners (Minow, 2022).

In the 2000s, the activity of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) increased, frequently together with local NGOs, whereby the former were funding, technologically assisting, and lobbying for the introduction of legal changes (Chudyk, 2023). Another book was the Lawyers' movement (1987), 2007, 2009, in which the value of law activism was emphasized, and also enhanced the role of civil society in delivering justice. The CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs are an important component of the informal legal aid system of Pakistan nowadays (Islam et al., 2023), which meets the needs of the underserved populations in Pakistan in terms of justice (Li & Harji, 2025).

Theoretical Context of the Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal

Aid in Pakistan

The issues faced by CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs when providing free legal services to Pakistan can be discussed with references to some theoretical frameworks, particularly the Access to Justice Theory and the Legal Empowerment Approach. According to the Access to Justice Theory, fairness, inclusiveness, and availability of the legal systems to all, especially the poor and marginalized, are crucial. In Pakistan, CBOs and NGOs also act as alternatives to accessing the justice system in countries where many individuals cannot access legal services through structural barriers, including poverty, illiteracy, and geographic isolation. They facilitate the legal processes, offer services, educate the communities on their rights, and create a change in closing the gap between the state and its citizens.

The approaches promoted by the United Nations and other organizations, including Open Society Foundations, are the Legal Empowerment Approach, which relies on enabling individuals to understand, use, and manipulate the law. The theory encourages the involvement of the grassroots and community-based solutions, which can be likened to the functioning of CBOs in rural and under-explored areas of Pakistan. More so, the Civil Society Theory outlines how the non-state institutions can also bolster democracy by making institutions accountable and putting pressure on them to change the law. This position is used by INGOs and NGOs to influence policy and also to create rights-based legal structures.

Moreover, the Civil Society Theory clarifies the role of non-state actors in enhancing the democracy of states by keeping institutions accountable and in promoting legal amendments. It is a role normally played by INGOs and NGOs in a manner that is used to negotiate policy and advance legal frameworks based on rights. A combination of these theories highlights the fact that the role of the civil society organizations extends beyond the angle of legal aid to the structural transformation of the justice climate in

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Laws Regarding the Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal Aid in Pakistan

Free legal aid in Pakistan is legally based on the constitutional provisions and on the particular laws. The state is required to provide justice that is both cheap and quicker in the Constitution of Pakistan in Article 37(d). Nevertheless, no nationwide legislation is specifically related to legal assistance, and this creates great gaps in its application. Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 provides legal assistance to underage criminals, and the Legal Aid and Justice Authority Act, 2020 was designed to formalize and standardize free legal assistance in the entire nation. Under this Act, an organization called the Legal Aid and Justice Authority (LAJA) was formed, and its role is to liaise with bar councils, civil society, and government to offer legal aid to the vulnerable.

The state laws are also supplemented by the NGOs that are governed by the frameworks of the Trust Act 1882 or Societies Registration Act 1860. However, the INGOs have to be registered with the Economic Affairs Division and adhere to certain operational procedures. Regardless of these legal provisions, implementation remains very poor, and the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs is therefore vital to close the legal aid gap throughout Pakistan.

Challenges for the Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal Aid in Pakistan

Although CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs have a great role to play, they encounter several issues when it comes to providing free legal assistance in Pakistan. Financial sustainability and lack of funds are one of the main challenges. Donor support is extremely important to many organizations and is usually short-term and project-based, so it is hard to sustain a steady legal aid service. Legal and bureaucratic limits also cripple them. The Economic Affairs Division, especially, can slow down or hinder the activities of INGOs by

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being very strict in the registration and monitoring of their activities. On the same note, local NGOs have to deal with complicated compliance systems that may restrict their reach and performance.

The trained legal professionals available are also few, and they are not willing to work in rural or underserved areas where legal aid is mostly required. CBOs do not have access to competent attorneys and legal infrastructure, and service delivery is patchy. Lack of coordination between the civil society organizations and the government institutions is another significant challenge. This dislocation makes the legal aid efforts less effective and leads to either duplication or service gaps. Finally, social and cultural obstacles, including gender discrimination, ignorance of the law, and distrust in formal legal systems, tend to deny people (and especially women and minorities) access to or utilization of legal aid services.

Opportunities for the Role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Providing Free Legal Aid in Pakistan

However, the odds are not insurmountable as CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs can grow and improve their contribution in giving free legal aid in Pakistan. The Legal Aid and Justice Authority (LAJA) Act, 2020, offers a legal framework of cooperation between the government and civil society, which can be considered one of the key opportunities. It puts in place the possibility of an organized collaboration and legal aid initiatives funded by the state.

There is also the growing utilization of technology and digital platforms, which is also an opportunity. Organizations can use online legal awareness campaigns and legal aid helplines, and mobile apps to reach underserved and remote populations more efficiently and cost-effectively.

The general level of awareness regarding legal rights, especially among women, young people, and marginalized groups, has also increased. Such an increasing need for

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justice services permits the NGOs and CBOs to expand the community activities, legal literacy, and advocacy. The international funding agencies and development partners are dedicated to assisting in access to justice in Pakistan. INGOs can be instrumental in directing resources, providing technical guidance, and facilitating best practices around the world. Also, bar councils and academic institutions may be utilized to create capacity, encourage the culture of pro bono, and establish networks of volunteer lawyers-strengthening the legal aid provision throughout the country. When used well, these opportunities can go a long way in enhancing access to justice for everybody.

Discussion

The influence of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in the provision of free legal aid in Pakistan is very important since these groups are highly important where a full functioning state system does not exist in delivering legal assistance. These groups are addressing essential gaps by supplying legal awareness, representation, and advocacy for vulnerable groups. The CBOs are at the grassroots, where they form trust and resolve local feuds in their informal way. Legal aid organizations such as the Legal Aid Society or AGHS Legal Aid Cell are more organized and offer legal services and policy experiences as well as financial means with the assistance of the INGOs.

All these organizations have played a significant role in the delivery of justice and legal empowerment in spite of the existing problems, such as low funding, regulatory challenges, and a lack of coordination. Their operations complement the work of the state and require modifications in the legislation. Technology and legal education may assist civil society and government institutions to expand even further the access and sustainability of free legal assistance in the multidimensional justice landscape in Pakistan.

Conclusion

CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs are critical in the support of free legal assistance in Pakistan, particularly in areas where the state machinery has failed. These organizations

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provide access to justice to underserved and marginalized groups through legal awareness and representation, and by working with the community. They face obstacles in the form of a lack of funding and legal restrictions, but their persistent activities pay off in the form of legal empowerment and human rights protection. These organizations can further enhance the legal aid system with improved coordination, support of policy, and utilization of technology. They also play a vital role in creating a more just and inclusive, and equitable society in Pakistan.

Recommendations

- 1. Enhance Capacity Building:** Conduct frequent training of legal workers, staff, paralegals, and volunteers to enhance the service quality.
- 2. Funding Support:** To ensure sustainability in the delivery of legal aid, seek local and foreign funding in order to fund the programs.
- 3. Get Technology and Reach:** Develop Web portals, cellphone applications, and helplines, as they will access legal aid, particularly in the low-populated areas.
- 4. Optimize Coordination:** Forge a formality between the civil societies and the government agencies so that the provision of the legal aid services may become simplified.
- 5. Monitor and Evaluate Programs:** Monitor programs at the Institute to gauge the effectiveness of the legal aid programs regarding transparency and efficiency.
- 6. The Pro Bono Culture:** Find out what strategies will enable to motivate the lawyers and law students to offer free legal care through bar associations and higher educational institutions.
- 7. Streamline Registration:** This increases the regulatory and bureaucratic process of the NGOs and INGOs to streamline the process.
- 8. Develop Legal Literacy:** Mass legal awareness initiatives should be created to create awareness and specifically on the rights of the people, and especially the women and the marginalized groups.

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9. Support Policy: Reform policies in order to ensure that the legislation pertaining to legal aid is better and that the right to access justice should be treated as a human right.

10. Target Gender-Sensitive Services: target the legal aid activities considering the legal problems of women and children.

Research Limitations

This study has limitations regarding the provision of free legal aid by CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in Pakistan. First of all, the availability of recent data and official records was restricted, which restricted the potential to estimate the scope and success of various legal aid programs fully. Many organizations do not have publicly available performance reports, and it thus becomes difficult to measure the results against objective performance.

Second, the study relies on secondary materials such as reports and scholarly materials due to the scarcity of time and resources. Face-to-face interviews or in-person research of respondents, such as legal aid recipients, lawyers, and other organizational workers, would have been more informative. Moreover, in Pakistan, there exist discrepancies in terms of areas; hence, the findings might not be highly applicable in all the provinces, particularly the remote or war-infested regions, where access to legal aid is complex. Finally, the regulatory environment of NGOs and INGOs in Pakistan is dynamic, which may further influence the applicability of some of the observations in the long run, requiring constant tracking of policy.

Research Implications

This study brings out the importance of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in addressing the gap in justice in Pakistan, especially among marginalized and vulnerable groups. The results highlight the fact that there should be a more effective partnership between the civil society and the governmental institutions to develop a more unified and efficient legal aid system. These learnings can help policymakers to formulate inclusive laws that

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acknowledge and recognize the role of non-state actors in delivering justice.

To legal professionals and bar councils, the study promotes pro bono legal services and legal learning, especially in the underserved localities. The research can also be of interest to donor agencies and other international partners in terms of allocating funds and technical expertise to access-to-justice programs. In the academic sense, this study adds to the existing literature on legal empowerment and civil society participation, which provides a basis to conduct additional empirical research. In general, it is a call to action to the multi-stakeholders to enhance legal assistance in Pakistan.

Future Research Directions

The future research can address the discussion of the role of CBOs, NGOs, and INGOs in the provision of free legal assistance in Pakistan and many critical concerns.

- 1. Field Empirical Studies:** Be conversant with those who have benefited from the legal support, along with the workers of the CBOs and lawyers, to achieve industry-level knowledge.
- 2. Effect of Donor Funding:** Investigate the impact of the donor priorities in the designing, scoping, and making legal assistance to Pakistan sustainable.
- 3. Gender-Specified Research: Research problem:** Do law assistance services particularly meet the demands of women, particularly in domestic violence, inheritance, and family law?
- 4. Measure Capacity and Resource Inequality:** Explore the inadequacy of human, financial, and technical resources in posing a threat to the quality of legal assistance.
- 5. Measure Long-Term Impact:** Longitudinal research to establish the long-term effect of legal assistance on the populations in the issue of human rights and social justice.
- 6. Policy and Regulatory Environment:** How do laws and regulations influence the survival and autonomy of NGOs and INGOs in the justice sector?
- 7. Read Pro Bono Culture:** Find out why and how volunteer lawyers are useful to the

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non-profit and free legal aid institutions.

8. Comparison of Models in Local Region: Compare models of legal aid in other provinces to determine the locality problems, and the measures that have been or have not been successful. **9. Study NGO/INGO The Relationship between the civil society organization and the government:** The relationship between the government and the civil society organization in the provision of legal assistance will be determined. **10. Test Digital Legal Aid Solutions:** Learn how mobile applications, web portals, and helplines can be added to increase access to legal aid, and to the underserved population in particular.

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