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Understanding the Social Impact of the Government Legal Aid Program in Bangladesh: A Study of Students at the University of Rajshahi

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ABSTRACT: The Government Legal Aid Services is one of the largest welfare programs in Bangladesh, created for helping disadvantaged groups access to justice. The program provides mediation and legal support to resolve disputes quickly and fairly. Despite its importance, there has been little research on its effectiveness or its impact on society. This paper looks at the social impact and efficiency of the Government Legal Aid Program by focusing on how students at the University of Rajshahi perceive and understand it. The researcher surveyed 265 students from 13 faculties, using convenience sampling. The results show that just over half of the students had previously heard of Legal Aid Services, suggesting that low public awareness remains a major challenge for the program. Alongside the survey, the study used case studies, interviews with key informants, and fieldwork at Rajshahi Court to identify the program's strengths and weaknesses. The findings show that while the program provides important support, its mediation process is not free of flaws. Although the Legal Aid (Amendment) Act, 2025 has made the mediation orders enforceable through the civil courts, the legal aid officers lack authoritative powers in case of its breach. To ensure a co-operative and effective governmental legal aid service, this study suggests some structural changes in the Act. Moreover, it also recommends running stronger awareness campaigns to make the program more accessible and better known. These changes could help to reduce unnecessary lawsuits, ease the burden on courts, and improve access to justice.

KEYWORDS: Legal Aid Services, Mediation, Access to Justice, Public-awareness, Rajshahi University.

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1. Introduction

In developing nations such as Bangladesh, a substantial segment of the population remains deprived of adequate legal assistance, with systemic poverty serving as the primary driver of this marginalization. Initiating formal judicial proceedings requires mandatory court fees, while the vast majority of indigent individuals lack the financial means to retain experienced legal representation. This structural barrier creates a deeply discriminatory socio-legal landscape. Conversely, Article 27 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equality before the law for all citizens, while Article 28 explicitly authorizes the state to enact special provisions for the advancement of backward sections of society. To bridge this constitutional promise and socioeconomic reality, the government introduced the Legal Aid Program, a state-funded initiative designed to deliver accessible legal support to economically vulnerable populations. Under Section 2(a) of the Legal Aid Services Act (LASA) of 2000, legal aid is formally defined as the provision of assistance to litigants who are hindered from seeking justice due to financial insolvency, destitution, helplessness, or other compounding socioeconomic factors.

Specifically, under Section 2(a) of the Legal Aid Services Act 2000, this statutory definition encompasses several crucial forms of support, including legal counsel and active assistance for cases that are about to be commenced, already initiated, or currently pending before a court. Furthermore, it covers the remuneration of mediators or arbitrators engaged to settle disputes through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms pursuant to Sections 89A and 89B of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, alongside any necessary supplementary assistance and comprehensive financial coverage for case-related expenditures. Finally, it ensures the formal payment of appointed attorneys in accordance with standard fee rates established under the rules governing subsections (i) through (iii).[1]

Under LASA, 2000, the **National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO)** is formed. It is working under the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs. This organization has framed several policies to help the poor in getting proper legal assistance. Amidst these functions, mediation is worth mentioning. This mediation process is conducted by a number of **Legal Aid Officers** appointed by the government.[2] Besides, the whole team, forming the legal

[1] The Legal Aid Services Act 2000, s 2(a)
[2] The Legal Aid Services Act 2000, s 21A

aid office, conducts the great work to provide this benevolent service to the people who need it.

People often fail to take advantage of opportunities to get free legal advice due to a lack of awareness. It is intensely connected to the effectiveness of this governmental program. If a significant number of people are kept unaware of this service, the notion of this program will come into question. So, it is important to get a clear picture of the level of awareness among people in Bangladesh about Legal Aid services. As a conscious segment of our population, university students can significantly increase awareness among their friends, family, and acquaintances. Therefore, it is necessary to determine the students' level of awareness about Legal Aid facilities. This study focuses on the activities of the Legal Aid Officer for the benefit of people. It also aims to reveal the level of students' awareness at the University of Rajshahi (RU) regarding this governmental facility.

Moreover, identifying loopholes in the existing program is an important part of the process to improve it further. This study sought to identify the backlogs that are hindering the Government Legal Aid Program from achieving its expected goals. It also provides recommendations that could improve its effectiveness. To explore these matters, this study first visits the constitutional promises and laws bringing legal support to life in Bangladesh, then examines the practical hurdles within the mediation process on the ground. To ground these discussions, it weaves together survey insights from university students, real case files, and perspectives from judges handling these matters daily. Finally, it offers practical recommendations and educational steps aimed at narrowing the awareness gap to make justice truly accessible.

2. Statement of the Problem

National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO) provides an appreciable support to ensure access to justice by providing legal assistance towards the needy individuals through dedicated Legal Aid Officers. While these officers successfully resolve many disputes through mediation without court interference, historical frameworks lacked a binding rule to commit parties to the verdict. This created a gap in its effectiveness, forcing aggrieved parties to seek court intervention. Eventually, it lasted into the increasing the number of lawsuits. Addressing this issue, the Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance 2025 made mediation decrees binding and added provisions for executing them in formal courts under Section 21(C). Yet, the proper

functioning of the legal aid system is facing some hurdles, hampering its overall effectiveness. This leaves a barrier to getting justice

Beyond these legal difficulties, the success of the program depends heavily on accessibility, the time required, and public awareness. Unfortunately, most people in Bangladesh remain unaware of NLASO's services, even though knowing about them is the first step toward using them. Because university students come from various regions across Bangladesh, looking at their awareness levels gives a clear picture of the overall situation in the country. This research examines the efficiency of the government legal aid program, evaluates the effectiveness of its mediation process, and measures the awareness of students at the University of Rajshahi.

3. Literature Review

Some books, articles from journals and newspapers relevant to the Legal Aid Services are reviewed in this section.

Md. Atickus Samad in his book 'A Text Book on ADR and Legal Aid' strategically described about the implementation and operational rules of the existing legal aid structure of Bangladesh. Here, the author emphasized on the essentiality of exercising this informal resolution procedure, along with a demarcation of its prevailing flaws. The book offers a theoretical basis on ADR and Legal Aid, combining with some effective strategies through which this initiative can be more accessible to the people.[3]

In the research article titled 'Legal Aid in Bangladesh: Application and commitment,' the author, Esrat Jahan, portrayed the structure of the NLASO.[4] Here, she focused on the different committees of this organization and their functions. This article examines the role of various government and non-governmental organizations in providing free legal assistance. She upheld the right of disadvantaged people to receive logistical support in times of need. Besides, she recognized the lack of awareness among people about Legal Aid Services.

In the research article 'A Critical Analysis of Legal Aid in Bangladesh', the author termed the Legal Aid Services a crying need to ensure social justice.[5] Due to poverty and lack of legal knowledge, many citizens are deprived of legal assistance. Legal Aid can solve this problem to

[3] Md. Atickus Samad, A Text Book on ADR and Legal Aid (National Law Publications 2013)

[4] Esrat Jahan, 'Legal Aid in Bangladesh: Application and Commitment' (2015) 4(2) International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, version-3, 1 https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v4(2)/Version-3/A04230109.pdf accessed 22 January 2024.

[5] Nannu Mian, 'A Critical Analysis of Legal Aid in Bangladesh' (2014) 2 *International Journal of Social Science Research* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272026513_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Legal_Aid_in_Bangladesh/citation/download> accessed 22 January 2024.

a great extent. The author found some weaknesses and loopholes in the Legal Aid Sector. The procedural complexities made people unwilling to avail this facility. So, the ultimate goal of the Legal Aid Service cannot be adequately implemented. This article focused on the procedural shortcomings of the Legal Aid Service and offered recommendations to improve the sector.

The article titled ‘Overview of Government Legal Aid System’ included the overall functions of the National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO).[6] According to the author, the right to get Legal Aid is not a mercy to the poor; instead, it is a constitutional right. He focused on the activities of this governmental organization to help disadvantaged people. The article also includes the structure of NLASO and the different committees under it. It described the awareness measures taken by the Legal Aid Authority. Besides, the article portrays the role of a Legal Aid Officer to conduct these services smoothly. Lastly, the author mentioned some of the successful outcomes of NLASO's various policies.

Another article titled ‘Legal Aid Empowers the Critically Disadvantaged People of Bangladesh’ describes the importance of the implementation and awareness of the Legal Aid Services.[7] It focused on the fundamental principles of Government Legal Aid. According to the author, this poorly-focused program ensures accessible, accountable, high-quality, equitable, and collaborative legal services. With help from other non-governmental organizations, this program extends its activities to the people. Legal Aid Services can help disadvantaged people understand their rights and achieve justice.

The research article 'Free Access to Justice for the Poor through Legal Aid’ contains a brief description of the framework and strategies of the Legal Aid Services.[8] This paper provides an in-depth discussion of the structure and functions of NLASO. The article focused on the steps for taking legal help from this organization. It included several case studies to reveal the success rate of the mediation process. Besides, the author described the functions of NGOs in spreading Legal Aid Services across the country.

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[6] Syed Afzal Hossain Islam, 'Overview of Government Legal Aid System' The Daily Star (Dhaka, 29 April 2013) <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/overview-of-government-legal-aid-system>accessed 29 January 2025

[7] Bisheswar Singha, 'Legal Aid Empowers the Critically Disadvantaged People of Bangladesh' (NLASO Publication) <http://nlaso.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/nlaso.portal.gov.bd/publications/9b8d5bde_e471_4708_997f_168f9db5cf05/Legal%20Aid%20Empowers%20the%20Critically%20Disadvantaged%20People%20of%20Bangladesh.pdf> accessed 26 February 2025

8 ‘Free Access to Justice for the Poor through Legal Aid: Bangladesh Perspective’ The Lawyers and Jurists https://www.lawyersnjurists.com/article/free-access-justice-poor-legal-aid-bangladesh-perspective/ accessed 22 January 2024.

The next article reviewed is ‘Legal Aid for Ensuring Access to Justice in Bangladesh: A Paradox?’ This article stated the drawbacks of this governmental facility.[9] The author described the Legal Aid Service as a paradox and highlighted shortcomings in its implementation. The Government has a structure in place to provide legal assistance to the needy, but the outcomes are not satisfactory. The author has recommended some policies to develop this service and ensure justice.

The Daily Star has published a law review on the Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance 2025, discussing the ins and outs of the instrument. This write-up specifically focused on the existing anomalies in the mediation process, even after the changes, and concluded that the outcome remains inadequate. It is claimed by the author Satirtha Chakma that, though there is an official claim of resolving 90% of disputes through this process, there is no verifiable data to validate these results. Moreover, the study described this governmental process as quite unsuccessful at generating public awareness.[10]

4. Research Gap

In this research, the researcher examines the literature gaps to address aspects of the Government Legal Aid Program in Bangladesh, including its effectiveness, public awareness, and procedural issues.

Although there is existing literature explaining the setup and activities of the National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO), there is limited empirical research on how it has been effective in serving disadvantaged populations. Previous research mainly analyzes legal aid as a model and does not critically examine its impact on access to justice.

The awareness gap in Legal Aid Services has been identified in some studies, but none have examined university students' awareness, especially at Rajshahi University (RU). Further detailed research is required to determine how students are aware of their civil rights and the available services.

Although procedural complexities have been identified in the legal aid process, including mediation, little research has been examined specific backlogs and inefficiencies in mediation.

[9] Farzana Akter, 'Legal Aid for Ensuring Access to Justice in Bangladesh: A Paradox?' (2017) Asian Journal of Law and Society <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/asian-journal-of-law-and-society/article/legal-aid-for-ensuring-access-to-justice-in-bangladesh-a-paradox/6502B651208873A83ED88184E8DDCEE1> accessed 22 January 2024.

[10] Satirtha Chakma, 'Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance 2025' The Daily Star (Dhaka, 22 July 2025) <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/legal-aid-services-amendment-ordinance-2025-3945886>accessed 17 January 2026

The literature identifies general gaps but fails to provide a comprehensive review of the barriers to mediation that influence its application.

5. Objectives

This study has been conducted with three specific objectives. These are-

1. To understand the effectiveness of the Government Legal Aid Program;
2. To discover the awareness level regarding the Legal Aid Services among RU students; and
3. To reveal the backlogs of the existing mediation process in the Government Legal Aid Program.

6. Methodology

(a) Basic Research Method: The research has been conducted using both qualitative (document study and Key Informant Interviews (KII)) and quantitative (questionnaire survey) research methods. Thus, a mixed research design has been adopted.

(b) Study Population: For the questionnaire survey, students of the University of Rajshahi comprised the population of this study.

(c) Sampling: A total of 265 respondents (both male and female) from thirteen faculties of the university have been selected through convenience sampling.

(d) Primary and Secondary Data: Primary data has been collected using questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The information derived from books, articles, case studies, Acts, and Rules has been used as secondary data.

(e) Data Collecting, Processing, and Analysis: The quantitative data have been collected using Google Forms. The collected data has been processed automatically using the same software. The KII data has been processed and analyzed manually by the researcher. Simple statistical tools such as frequency distributions, percentages, and graphs have been used to analyze the data.

7. Scope and Limitation

This research is divided mainly into two parts. Firstly, the Legal Aid Office of Rajshahi District has been selected to provide a brief overview of the effectiveness of the Legal Aid Services

provided here by the Legal Aid Officers. Secondly, a questionnaire survey is conducted among students of the University of Rajshahi to gauge their knowledge about Legal Aid Services.

However, this study is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, it was not possible to include all students of the University of Rajshahi in the questionnaire survey due to structural constraints. Besides, the research was conducted under tight time limitations, and it was restricted to case studies from the Legal Aid Office of the Rajshahi district, excluding offices from other regions.

8. Establishment of Legal Aid Program in Bangladesh

The constitution of Bangladesh declares equal rights among people under Article 27. Providing legal aid to the underprivileged people is a wonderful way to establish this equality. The Supreme Court of Bangladesh also emphasized the importance of providing legal assistance to the poor to give them equal standing. In many cases, marginalized people cannot get the chance to secure proper legal assistance, and as a result, they are deprived of justice. In *Dr. Neelima Ibrahim Vs. Bangladesh*[11] case, the Supreme Court opined that, unless otherwise excluded by law, the principle of *Audi Alterum Partem* should be implied to have been proved in every statute. This case has highlighted the importance of providing governmental funding to help poverty-stricken people so they are not left unheard.

In the *Hamidul Huq Chowdhury v Bangladesh*[12] case, the Supreme Court also focused on establishing equality and equal protection of law among people. It can largely be achieved when everyone has the same opportunities to deal with their legal matters. The Supreme Court mentioned in *Dr. Nurul Islam v, Bangladesh*[13]case that if there is a classification in legislation, it must be made for a valid reason. It should contain all reasonable relations to the objects and to the public purpose sought to be achieved by the legislation. So, it is clear that the judicial organ of Bangladesh has been focusing on establishing equality among people, keeping in mind that all should have proper legal assistance.

With a view to ensuring equal legal rights for people of all walks of life, the Government of Bangladesh took a formal initiative in 1994 to enact laws relating to legal aid. A National Legal Aid Committee was formed by a Resolution. However, it proved ineffective and was repealed

[11] *Dr Neelima Ibrahim v Bangladesh* 32 DLR 201.
[12] *Hamidul Huq Chowdhury v Bangladesh* 34 DLR 190.
[13] *Dr Nurul Islam v Bangladesh* 33 DLR (AD) 205.

by another Resolution in 1996. At last, in 2000, the Legal Aid Services Act was passed. It contains some structured, state-funded schemes that are greatly beneficial to poor litigants. A statutory body, the National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO), has been established under this Act to implement its provisions nationwide. Obviously, the Legal Aid Services program is doing a great job of making impoverished people feel they have equal opportunities. Still, some loopholes in the system are diminishing the expected outcome of this benevolent service.

9. Analysis of the Facilities Provided by the Government Legal Aid Program

The main vision of the Legal Aid Services program is to ensure equal legal rights for the people of Bangladesh, as guaranteed by the Constitution. To achieve this goal, it aims to ensure access to justice for all. This governmental service has been serving the poverty-stricken people with the same legal facilities that the rich people can easily get. In this way, class discrimination is being reduced. Besides, Legal Aid Services ensure easy access to legal representation, removing the hassle for illiterate poor people. In every District Court of Bangladesh, there is a Legal Aid Office. In most cases, the office is situated on the ground floor of the building so that people can easily find it.

The Legal Aid Services Program serves a large number of facilities and provides services to people entitled by law. In addition, poor litigants can fully represent their cases using government funds through the program. Furthermore, they can receive any kind of legal advice from the service.

One of the most remarkable services of this program is its ability to resolve problems between parties through mediation. This method is conducted by the Legal Aid Officer. The post of the Legal Aid Officer has been created under section 21A of the Legal Aid Services Act, 2000. Rules 4-10 of the Legal Aid Services (Legal Advice and Alternative Dispute Resolution) Rules, 2015 outline the mediation process followed here. The parties seeking legal aid may apply to resolve the dispute outside the court. Here, the Legal Aid Officer plays a vital role in helping the parties reach a peaceful agreement. Then he will record the results. However, the result is not binding on the parties.

Historically, this non-binding nature of ADR method created a procedural bar that forced aggrieved parties back into formal courts upon breach. Now, the recent Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 introduced progressive structural changes, such as formalizing pre-case and post-case mediation options. In some specified areas like family matters, cheque dishonor, house rend dispute, partition claims, parental maintenance, pre-emption suits and dowry issues, pre-case mediation is now made compulsory.[14] The most remarkable change in this area is, if the parties come to an agreement, the final mediation order is made binding upon the parties under section 21C of the Act, and it can be enforced as a formal civil decree. In this way, the current legal framework incorporated the pathways to a hassle-free execution of mediation decrees. This order is final, leaving no scope for appeal to the civil court. However, despite all these positive sides, the procedural difficulties are not fully swiped off by this amendment. Specifically, the mediator (the Legal Aid Officer) is still vested with no direct penal or coercive power to punish parties who violate the agreement, meaning enforcement relies entirely on subsequent judicial intervention.

Some other notable services provided by the Legal Aid Services Program are-

(i) Rendering free legal advice;
(ii) Providing free vokalatnama;
(iii) Helping the litigants to appoint panel lawyers;
(iv) Providing the fees of the arbitrators or lawyers;
(v) Supplying free copies of judgments, decrees, etc.;
(vi) Paying any other expenses relating to CR or GR cases and so on.

However, the lack of accountability among the program's higher authorities often undermines its effectiveness. On the other hand, the members of the Legal Aid Committees, who belong to the upper class of the society, often fail to properly realize the depth of the misery of those people and thus cannot fulfill their requirements.[15]

10. Effectiveness of the Government Legal Aid Services Program

The present study primarily focused on the effectiveness of the various steps taken by the government's Legal Aid Services. To determine this, a questionnaire survey was conducted among students at the University of Rajshahi regarding their awareness of this service. Proper

[14] Legal Aid Services (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, Schedule
[15] Mahfuz Alam, 'Implementation of Legal Aid Act 2000: Problems and Prospect' (2018) Academia.edu <https://www.academia.edu/38206011/Implementation_of_Legal_Aid_Act_2000_problems_and_prospect_docx> accessed 22 January 2024

awareness and knowledge of this governmental service are basic elements for making it effective. As the responsible representatives of the people of Bangladesh, the students of RU have been chosen as the study population. So, their awareness rate offers a glimpse of the actual condition of our country by indicating the availability of Legal Aid facilities.

Secondly, to provide a clearer understanding of the research process, this study includes case studies to determine the effectiveness of the mediation process in resolving disputes between parties seeking support from Legal Aid Services.

And lastly, the study includes vital information collected from Legal Aid Officers, both former and current, of the Rajshahi District Court, which significantly enriches the overall analysis and strengthens the study's conclusions.

10.1 Findings from the field Survey

For the questionnaire survey, 265 students from 13 faculties of RU were selected through convenience sampling. Students from the 1st year (Honors) to the Master's took part in it. About half of these students belong to middle-class families. More than thirty six percent are from lower-middle-class families, and about thirteen percent of the respondents are from lower-class families. They answered some crucial questions relevant to this study.

About 52% of the respondents in this research came from rural areas. The proportion of students living in district towns was about 31%, and the remaining respondents live in Upazilla areas.

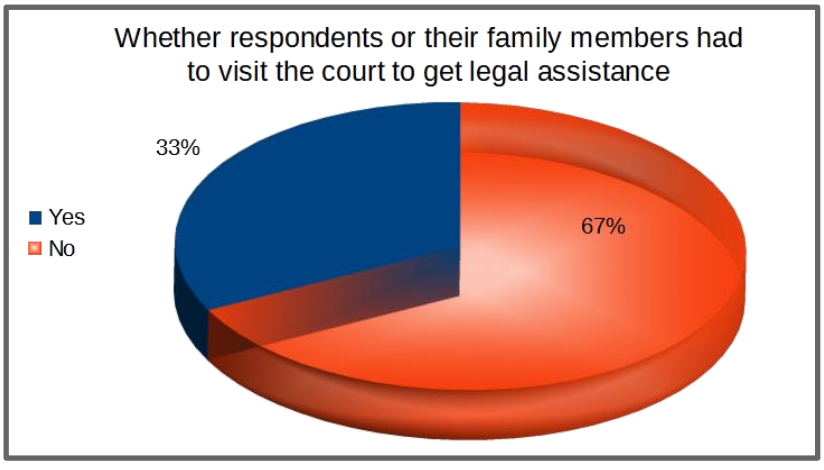


Chart 1

Regarding whether students or their families have ever visited a court for legal assistance, about 33% replied in the affirmative, while the rest responded in the negative (Chart 1).

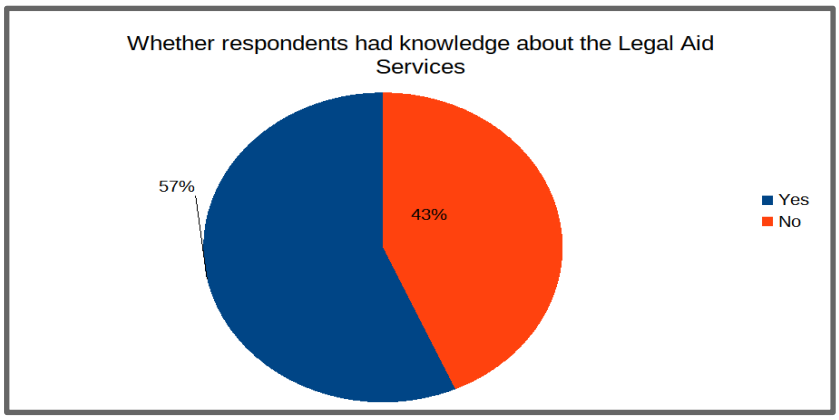


Chart 2

Responding to the question about their knowledge of Legal Aid Services of Bangladesh, more than 57% of respondents reported being aware of the program. The remaining 43% had never heard of this government facility (Chart 2).

Diversified replies are found to the question on the source of their knowledge of Legal Aid Services. The most significant portion of the students (36.8%) has learned about this service from the internet. The second-largest group (28.3%) has learned about it through newspapers, books, or other written materials. Only 4% of them learned about this service through the governmental awareness campaign.

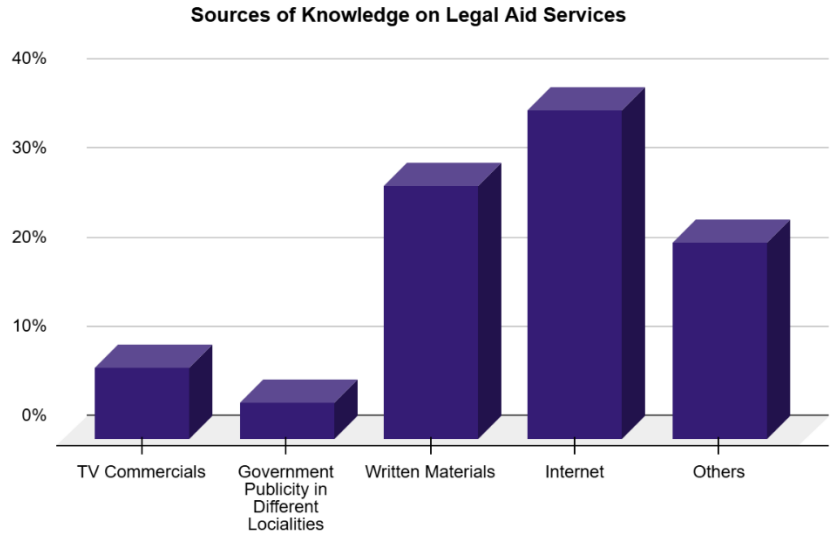


Chart 3

programs conducted in their home areas. The rest of the students have known this matter from other sources (Chart 3).

The respondents also answered whether any governmental awareness program concerned with the Legal Aid Services had occurred in their home areas.

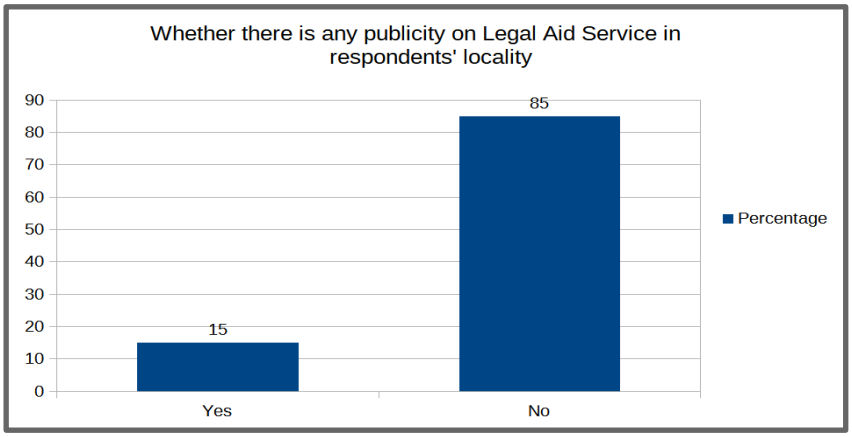


Chart 4

Only 15% of the respondents said that such awareness programs were held in their regions. The majority of them replied in the negative (Chart 4). This raises a question about the government's initiatives to raise awareness of this vital matter.

While answering the question on whether the respondents or any person known to them has availed any service from the Legal Aid Officer, only 19.6% responded in the affirmative. More than 80% do not know anyone who has availed this service. (Chart 5)

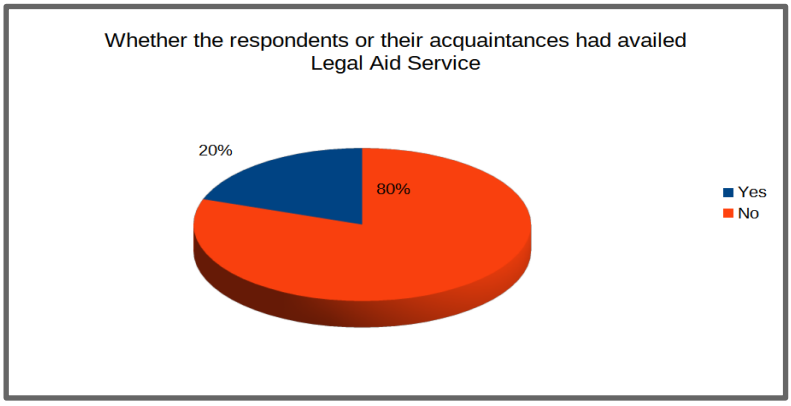


Chart 5

These statistical data help to provide an idea of the level of awareness among RU students regarding the Government Legal Aid Services.

10.2 Case Studies

Three cases relating to Legal Aid Services and the application of the mediation process are included here. It helped the researcher gain an idea of the outcome of the mediation process undertaken by the Legal Aid Officers.

Case 1

The Applicant Sumi Lakra applied for legal assistance from the Legal Aid Officer. The dispute was found eligible for mediation. The matter of conflict in this case was recovering post-divorce maintenance from her ex-husband, Md. Halim Ding. The Legal Aid Officer heard the statements of both parties and tried to settle the dispute. After the mediation process, the parties reach an agreement. Halim agreed to pay Sumi the dower of 70,000 Taka. The payment of this amount was conducted instantly before the court. And Sumi voluntarily agreed to remit the rest of her dower (80,000/-). It was an instance of peaceful resolution of a family dispute under the supervision of the Legal Aid Officer.[16]

Case 2

Another dispute on a family matter had been reported to the Legal Aid Officer for mediation. Applicant Fulsurat Khatun claimed an informal arrangement with her husband, Md. Saker Ali Babu, to obtain maintenance. The concerned Legal Aid Officer found this matter eligible for Mediation. He heard both parties and tried to convince them to reach a peaceful solution. Upon agreement of both parties, the defendant was ordered to pay a daily maintenance of Taka 250 to his wife and three children.

After seven months of this order, Babu stopped paying the required money. Fulsurat again came to the Legal Aid Office to get a remedy. This time, the Officer advised her to file a case in court against Babu and selected a lawyer from the panel of lawyers to handle the case. This situation illustrates the Legal Aid Officers' lack of power to punish parties who violate the agreement. Also, the absence of the binding effect of the Legal Aid Officer’s order makes this process less effective, as the aggrieved party must again take the case to a formal court.[17]

Case 3

This case also dealt with a family issue. Here, the applicant, Farzana Yasmin, accused her husband, Md. Mominul Islam, of domestic violence. She applied to the Legal Aid Officer to

[16] Sumi Khatun (Sumi Lakra) vs Md. Halim Ding, ADR 13, 2021 (Pre-Case), Legal Aid Office, Rajshahi
[17] Fulsurat Khatun vs Md Saker Ali Babu, ADR 75, 2021 (Pre-Case), Legal Aid Office, Rajshahi

mediate the matter. Farzana wanted *talaq* from her husband. She also demanded maintenance for herself and her three children. After the mediation, the two parties agreed to dissolve their marriage. The Legal Aid Officer ordered Mominul to pay 70,000/= as maintenance, and their *talaq (Talaq e Khula)* was enforced. The custody of their children was given to their mother. Mominul could visit the children twice a month, and the applicant party would make the necessary arrangements. In this way, the parties came to an agreement to resolve their dispute with the help of the Legal Aid Officer.[18]

The case studies show that it is up to the parties whether they choose to abide by the order issued by the Legal Aid Officer. In the event of a breach of the agreement, the Legal Aid Officer has no power to punish; he can at most provide legal assistance to the victim in filing a case in a formal court. This creates a huge barrier to ensure justice.

10.3. Key Informant Interviews (KII)

An informal interview was conducted to assess the effectiveness of Legal Aid Services. Two senior assistant judges, both former Legal Aid officers in Rajshahi District, provided key insights regarding this government initiative.

Md. Ariful Islam, the current Legal Aid Officer (2026) of Rajshahi District, demonstrates this government service as a pioneer in access to justice. It mainly focuses on rendering legal advice and facilities to the applicants. Besides, this method plays an important role in reducing the rate of multiplicity of suits. However, in some cases, publicity for this program seems inadequate, and to address this, institutional public hearings and courtyard meetings are held. There is a legal aid hotline for every district to serve the people. Also, if any panel lawyer shows a non-cooperative attitude towards the parties, the office can take remedial action against him. Moreover, the mediator can exercise the flexibility to collect evidence through a field visit if needed. There is also an option to file a *suo-motu* case under this governmental program. The recent amendment inserted the process for executing the mediation decree, making the system more effective. Overall, the interviewee expressed his satisfaction with the existing legal aid service.

Luna Ferdous, the former Legal Aid Officer of the Rajshahi District, stated that the mediation process of the Legal Aid Services is a milestone in the pursuit of justice. She opined that by

[18] Farzana Yasmin vs Md. Mominul Islam, ADR 7, 2021 (Pre-Case), Legal Aid Office, Rajshahi

taking legal assistance from Legal Aid Officers, disadvantaged people in Bangladesh have an opportunity to resolve their disputes. The mediation process can settle the conflict peacefully without the court's intervention. It made people willing to take advantage of the Government. According to Luna Ferdous, about 90% of her cases were resolved appropriately, and both parties agreed. The government has undertaken awareness programs in remote areas to inform people about Legal Aid Services and increase their success rate. She mentioned that if these government programs reach more people, they will know their right to legal assistance.

Tanzim Alam, the former Legal Aid Officer of the District of Rajshahi (2022), mentioned that the services provided by the Legal Aid Program are quite satisfactory. However, it has not yet reached the estimated goal. Mostly, she found that family-related disputes of the impoverished people are resolved through the mediation system. The order of mediation is not binding upon the parties. When a party violates the agreement, the Legal Aid Officer has no power to punish them. She can only refer the case to a panel lawyer for court proceedings. Here, the government will bear the litigation costs. This non-binding nature often decreases the effectiveness of the Legal Aid Services Program. Moreover, in many cases, the panel lawyers and advocates are not very cooperative in handling Legal Aid cases. It causes harm to the parties. She also mentioned that the Legal Aid Office of Rajshahi is located on the 7th floor of the Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court Building in Rajshahi. So, in some cases, it becomes difficult for underprivileged people to find the location. It would be easier to find if it were located on the ground floor of the building. Furthermore, awareness programs should be expanded at the grassroots level so that eligible individuals can learn about this government legal assistance.

11. Summary of the Findings

Firstly, this study shows that various renowned case references of the Bangladesh Supreme Court helped to initiate the provision of Legal Aid in Bangladesh. Cases like *Dr. Neelima Ibrahim Vs. Bangladesh, Hamidul Huq Chowdhury v, Bangladesh,* and *Dr. Nurul Islam v, Bangladesh* have paved the way to ensure equal legal rights to all people of our country in order to fulfill the mandate of Article 27 of the Bangladesh Constitution. Gradually, the National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO) has been established under the Legal Aid Services Act, 2000, to serve the underprivileged persons.

Secondly, the research highlighted some of the main services provided by Legal Aid Services. It includes free legal assistance to the impoverished people along with other legal expenses. The Legal Aid Program also includes resolving disputes between the parties through mediation.

However, due to a lack of accountability among higher authorities, Legal Aid seekers are not receiving the full benefits of this program. The inability to recognize the actual miseries of those people leads to reluctance among the authorities, which, in turn, undermines the effectiveness of the Legal Aid Services.

Thirdly, this study gives an idea about the knowledge of RU students on Legal Aid Services. The survey results show that about 33% of the respondents (or their families) have taken legal assistance from the court. About 56% of them knew about this service. It proves a comparatively low rate of awareness among the students. Most of these students learned about Legal Aid through the internet, books, newspapers, and other written materials. A very few respondents were informed that the government had undertaken awareness programs on Legal Aid in their home areas. Again, only 19.6% of the respondents or any person known to them have taken the benefit of the Legal Aid Services. It shows that the awareness regarding the benefits of Legal Aid Services and their use among the general public is relatively low. The rate should be increased in order to increase the effectiveness of the Legal Aid Services Program.

Fourthly, the case studies focused on the outcome of the mediation processes undertaken by the Legal Aid Officers. Two of these cases show the successful development of these processes. In the other case, the defendant disobeyed the order of the Officer after a particular period of time. In that case, the Legal Aid officer advised the applicant to file a lawsuit in the concerned court and referred a panel lawyer to deal with that case.

The mediation program included in this service does not have any binding effect on any party. The Legal Aid Officer also has no power to punish the person who breaches the order. So, he has to refer the case to the formal court. In such a case, it causes multiplicity of suits. It is obviously a drawback in the procedure of the Legal Aid Services. There is no list of cases mentioning those that should be resolved through mediation. If it were specified, it would be more effective along with the binding effect of the order towards the parties.

Lastly, the current Legal Aid Officer of Rajshahi District, Md. Ariful Islam noted that the program has been effective in providing legal advice, minimizing suit multiplicity, and proposing solutions, such as taking suo motu measures. He observed that publicity is not always sufficient, but recent gains, such as public outreach activities and the amendment to allow the execution of mediation decrees in formal courts, have strengthened the system and made it more effective. One of the former officers, Luna Ferdous, has made a positive comment

about the mediation process, which amicably resolves conflicts and benefits the underprivileged with a 90 percent success rate. Other former officer Tanzim Alam admitted that the program is satisfying, but noted its weaknesses, such as non-binding mediation agreements, uncooperative panel lawyers, and inaccessibility because the office was located. She highlighted that there should be greater awareness at the grassroots level.

12. Suggestions

Reviewing the findings, some suggestions can be made to overcome the current limitations of the mediation process and to increase awareness among people on this matter-

(i) The Legal Aid Committees should contain a representative from the legal aid seekers so that they can adequately understand the problems of the underprivileged people and take measures to solve them.

(ii) A handsome honorarium should be fixed for the panel lawyers and other staff of the Legal Aid Office to increase their commitment to this service.

(iii) Legal Aid Officers should have a minimum power to punish the parties violating the conditions of the mediation agreement.

(iv) Accountability should be maintained regarding complain of undue wastage of time to resolve a dispute. Because, if mediation fails, ultimately the parties have face the civil court, making the whole process far lengthier.

(v) Awareness programs should be increased all over Bangladesh to make people know about this free legal assistance service.

(vi) The concept of Legal Aid should be included in the textbooks of the secondary levels so that children will be conscious of it from an early age and also share the knowledge with their friends and families.

(vii) The success rate of the mediation programs should be disseminated widely to make people willing to avail themselves of this service.

13. Conclusion

Legal Aid Services is one of the best initiatives taken by the Government of Bangladesh to ensure equality of all citizens before the law. By availing this service, the poor and disadvantaged were able to exercise their legal rights. However, some drawbacks of this service

include keeping it from reaching the expected goal. If the effectiveness of the Legal Aid program can be expanded, it would be a great leap towards the human rights conditions of our country. Increasing awareness among people across the country will enhance its effectiveness. This is because the more people know about this service, the more willing they are to avail of it. The awareness level of people in Bangladesh, including students, should be raised to increase the popularity of the Legal Aid Services program. The Government has taken many initiatives to extend this legal opportunity to people across the country. However, as the steps taken are not reaching a large portion of our population, their awareness levels remain low. Provisions must be made so that disadvantaged people feel encouraged to avail themselves of the facilities of the Legal Aid Services.