

Mapping Professional Challenges among Female Lawyers in Shekhawati: A Sociological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The legal profession in India is dominated by men, but women lawyers have significantly increased their representation in the legal profession. However, their representation in the courts and semi-urban areas of the country remains limited. This study presents a sociological analysis of the professional hurdles faced by female lawyers in Shekhawati, a culturally conservative area within the northern state of Rajasthan. Based on secondary data on the issue of gender and legal profession, gender and employment in the rural part of the country, and the role of patriarchy in the professional life of people, the study outlines the key challenges faced by women lawyers in their profession, including gender-specific barriers and low retention rates, and courtroom as male-dominated arena, conflicts between family and work, and women lawyers not being included in the process of case distribution and client allocation. The study proposes the use of a mixed method to validate the above themes with the women advocates across the district bars of this region and place the analysis within the sociological frameworks of patriarchy, feminine organization, and intersectionality among others. The study states that the difficulties faced by female lawyers in Shekhawati should not be seen just as workplace or organizational issues. Rather, those challenges are formed by the interaction of the legal domain and a highly patriarchal social structure in the region.

1. Introduction

The profession of law is, in its essence, conceived as one consisting of a network of men working in the profession. This idea of a 'male profession' has persisted in the history of the Indian legal profession, which is viewed as being resistant to women lawyers entering the profession despite the fact that women have outnumbered men in law schools. It has been pointed out that women constitute only about 10 percent of legal professionals in India (Ballakrishnen, 2013). A comparison of bar council registries also shows that women lawyers were about 11 percent of the total number of lawyers in India in 2010 and have taken only a small rise to about 15 percent by the year 2020 (Sharma & Fukui, 2024).

The levels in the courts of law are similar, with women occupying approximately 3% of the Supreme Court, 14% of high court judges, and approximately 2 percent of important bar associations (Pandey & Khalid, 2026). As researchers claim in the article focusing on the situation of female lawyers, the number of women applying for law colleges has substantially increased, however, “the number of female lawyers is disappointing compared to their male counterparts.”

When one carefully examines the hierarchy of the profession, it becomes apparent that the pipeline nature of women’s absence can be traced: the greatest representation of women can be found at the entry level of the subordinate judiciary, but as one moves through the hierarchy from the district courts to the Supreme Court and the bar leadership, women’s percentage decreases significantly (Pandey & Khalid, 2026).

Existing literature on women in the Indian legal profession has focused almost exclusively on metropolitan courts, national law schools, and corporate law firms. Meanwhile, the semi-urban bar in northern India, known for its tightly knit kinship-based legal communities that uphold conservative patriarchal attitudes, has been omitted entirely from scholarly works. Shekhawati is a particularly interesting example in this regard. Situated in an arid territory in northern Rajasthan, which is famous for its merchant class and heroic havelis, Shekhawati is dominated by conservative social practices that rigidly define the roles of men and women. In such courts as those in Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu, the communities of lawyers are close-knit such that one’s career is always interrelated to family reputation.

This study explores the issues female lawyers may face in the Shekhawati region from a sociological perspective. It examines what has been written on gender and law, both nationally and internationally, considers the evidence gathered on patriarchy and women’s work, suggests an empirically applicable research methodology, and outlines a thematic perspective for examining the interaction between the patriarchal social order and the field of law as they shape women’s work experiences.

2. 2. Review of Literature

2.1 Women in the Indian legal profession: entry, attrition and hierarchy

Indian academia has heavily noted the phenomenon called “leaky pipeline.” Men and women enter the legal profession in nearly equal numbers, but women’s presence declines as they move up the professional ladder (Kannan, 2013). Research in the area of judiciary reveals several overlapping factors, including gender discrimination in the workplace, problems with work-life balance, lack of mentorship, and lack of representation in senior positions. Reviews of the plight of women lawyers in the larger system of judiciary have shown similar results, accounting for problems of “gender discrimination, lack of mentorship and underdeveloped infrastructure, and minimal number of cases assigned to them”. Qualitative research on women’s issues in district courts of Lucknow has revealed the problem of gender discrimination, as well as the way gender discrimination is intertwined with women’s professional and personal life (Mishra, 2015).

The international literature confirms that these patterns are not limited to India. U.S. research has long utilized phrases such as “glass ceiling, sticky floor, clogged pipeline, scenic highways or off-ramps” to express the fact that the number of women joining the legal profession is approximately the same as that of men, although the number of women in positions of leadership is not proportional to that of men (Jackson, 2007). As reported in survey of lawyers in Canada in the 1990s, around 46.8 % of the women surveyed reported having experienced unwanted teasing, making jokes, or sexual comments, and 44.2 % of respondents reported that they also did not have access to managerial positions. Graven in the UK found that there is a vast difference between men’s and women’s salaries, with female solicitors getting about 56% of what their male colleagues earn (Nicolson, 2005). The employment arrangements of lawyers indicate that work-family conflict plays a crucial role in women’s employment and income disadvantages in the U.S., with results differing in terms of the family’s circumstances and parents.

Having a broad viewpoint helps one understand the reason. A major study undertaken by Ethan Michelson concerning the status of women lawyers all over the globe suggests that there exists a clear course in the gender balance in this area of professional activity, which

was analyzed in the study involving data from 86 countries (Michelson, 2013). Compared with this global distribution, India can be rated one of the worst around the world with 5% of lawyers being women in this country, which is slightly better than Pakistan's 7% and worse than Japan's 16%, meanwhile, this figure is significantly lower than those for the United States (32–37%), Germany and Canada, and even lower than that of Italy, France, and the UK (46–50%), and Argentina and Brazil, which can be rated as the leaders in this respect (Michelson, 2013).

2.2 The courtroom as a masculine space

Another line of research investigates the courtroom as a domain of gender exclusion. It has been argued that the legal arena demonstrates "an ethics of discrimination that manifests itself particularly through a culture of disrespect toward women," who have to deal with constant harassment such as talking over them, ignoring them, and making derogatory jokes. All of this combined with the idea of stereotypical feminine traits such as empathy creates obstacles that prevent women from advancing in their careers (Lee et al., 2024). Moreover, inappropriate treatment by colleagues and clients makes things worse and deters women from assuming higher-ranking positions and getting well-paid professions. In particular, ethnographers who have studied the situation in Indian courts assert that women attorneys defy sexist remarks even when they are spoken in full view of the court, as well as report on regular humiliations of rape victims during cross-examinations carried out by male lawyers (Baxi, 2024).

Research in patriarchal societies illustrates the nature and form of workplace aggression. According to a cross-sectional survey of women lawyers in five major bar associations in Pakistan, the majority of women had experienced discouragement, disrespect, and discrimination based on their gender from colleagues, clients, and police agents. In addition, they reported sexual harassment by their male colleagues and litigants (Jamshed, 2024). Studies related to the culture of courts also demonstrate that the lack of necessary facilities, such as restrooms for women, and maternity and child care opportunities, as well as the ineffectiveness of anti-harassment laws, prevent many women from practicing litigation (Amjad, 2025). In India, the omnipresent "expectation of compromise" in courts, coupled with gender stereotyping rooted in traditions, castes, religions, and culture, extends the reach of patriarchal ideology into the area of justice itself (Tannvi & Narayana, 2022).

2.3 Gender, patriarchy and women's work in rural India

The literature in sociology pertaining to gender and work in rural India provides a context through which one can comprehend the local conditions of the practice of female lawyers in Shekhawati. The India Patriarchy Index proves that there is a link between patriarchy and gender-based division of labor. In addition, the northern region is characterized by large agricultural land and mechanized type of farming; as a result, women do not participate in outside labor (Singh et al., 2022). Research has suggested that men play the major role in agriculture and management, while women are responsible for domestic work and caregiving; thus, the existence of patriarchy severely limits women's functions and their dependence on men for the decision-making process. At the macro level, the reason for a significantly low female employment rate in India is determined by the existence of patriarchy. Analysis of rural women in terms of their agency indicates that action is constrained by intertwined systems of patriarchy and caste (Mukherjee, 2025). As for quantitative research, it has been well corroborated that patriarchal criteria negatively affect rural women's chances to attain education, independence, and social mobility (Singh, 2025).

2.4 The Rajasthan context

There are direct implications of the Rajasthan-specific scholarship. Discussions around gender justice in the state of Rajasthan indicate that patriarchal culture "often restricts women to their traditional responsibilities in matters related to education and job opportunities," that the involvement of women in violent crimes like domestic violence and honor killings leads to their reluctance to pursue their rights, and that educational inequality continues to be pronounced, especially in the rural parts (Gupta, 2025). In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that the decision in *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (which established guidelines on workplace sexual harassment) was made in this state; thus, it is quite symbolic that the

implementation of protection against harassment of women lawyers is often inconsistent. Finally, one of the bits of information told in the works dedicated to women education speaks about social and patriarchal factors that influence the professional path of women even before they practice law (Kundal & Singh, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on three connected sociological frameworks.

The first is the patriarchal division of labor. The age-old sociological insight states that male dominance is decisive in the differentiation between working processes connected with production and reproductive work. This allows for an explanation of the contrast between those elements of working in the legal profession (long time in the court, travelling, unpredictability of events, visibility in public) and the traditional roles of women in patriarchal families. In patriarchal families, women take on all domestic care activities, while the ideal type of employment in the legal organization does not work in favor of women.

Second, gendered organizations and the glass ceiling. Concepts such as the glass ceiling, sticky floor, and clogged pipeline explain how neutral forms of organization in the legal field, such as promotion criteria, case allocation, and participation in a lawyer-client network, work differently for men and women. The application of this framework to lawyers provides a possibility to stress the importance of informal systems of patronage through which junior lawyers gain access to briefs made by senior lawyers. Such systems favor men.

The third concept is intersectionality. Rural women professionals find themselves at the crossroads of gender, region, caste, class, and familial status. A woman lawyer in Shekhawati is at once a professional and daughter, wife, or daughter-in-law in a small community that is sensitive to its reputation; hence, her experiences cannot be understood through gender alone. The framework also brings in agency: women are not merely victims of structure but act within it and negotiate, resist, and strategize.

4. The Shekhawati Context

Shekhawati, a geographic area situated in the northern part of Rajasthan, is primarily composed of several districts, such as Churu, Jhunjhunu, and Sikar. Once a profitable trade area known for the local painters of havelis, it is now an area with a dry climate and conservative attitude towards social practices. According to the India Patriarchy Index, the area is found in the northern part of India by the analysis of how patriarchy functions in different districts. Even at the state level, one can find different manifestations of patriarchy that do not allow women to enter public life. Some of the important courts of the region are visible in Figure 1.

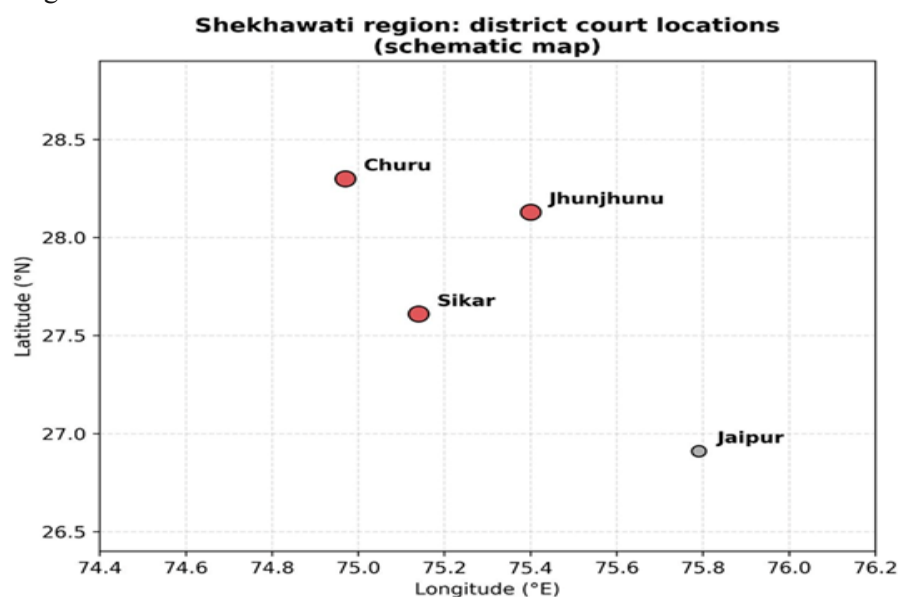


Figure 1. Shekhawati region: approximate locations of the district courts at Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu (schematic map constructed; Jaipur shown for orientation).

Sikar, Jhunjhunu, Churu, and other nearby towns operate a legal infrastructure that covers district and sessions courts that have their own bar councils. The attorneys operating here were secluded and small bar communities working in the area before a small number of judges and other lawyers. Most of the people who fight lawsuits in these courts belong to rural areas where agriculture is a major activity, including family law, property, and crime matters. They cannot avoid being involved in social issues in the community in which the attorneys are working. Courts are a source of influence when it comes to recognizing lawyers and understanding their social image, as attending court sessions for lawyer meetings with clients and sitting long hours is an activity closely scrutinized by the community people.

5. Methodology

5.1 Design and sample

The research adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-method design, which is presented in Figure 2. The target population consists of female lawyers who are registered members of the Bars Association in Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu. In light of the small size of the target population, a purposive-stratified random sampling is used. This sampling strategy involves segmenting the population according to specific criteria including age cohort, practice duration, practice area, marital status, and professional generation. In the first stage, a structured questionnaire is administered to a wide range of individuals, followed by a qualitative approach which includes in-depth interviews with a selected number of individuals and observations of courts and bar associations.

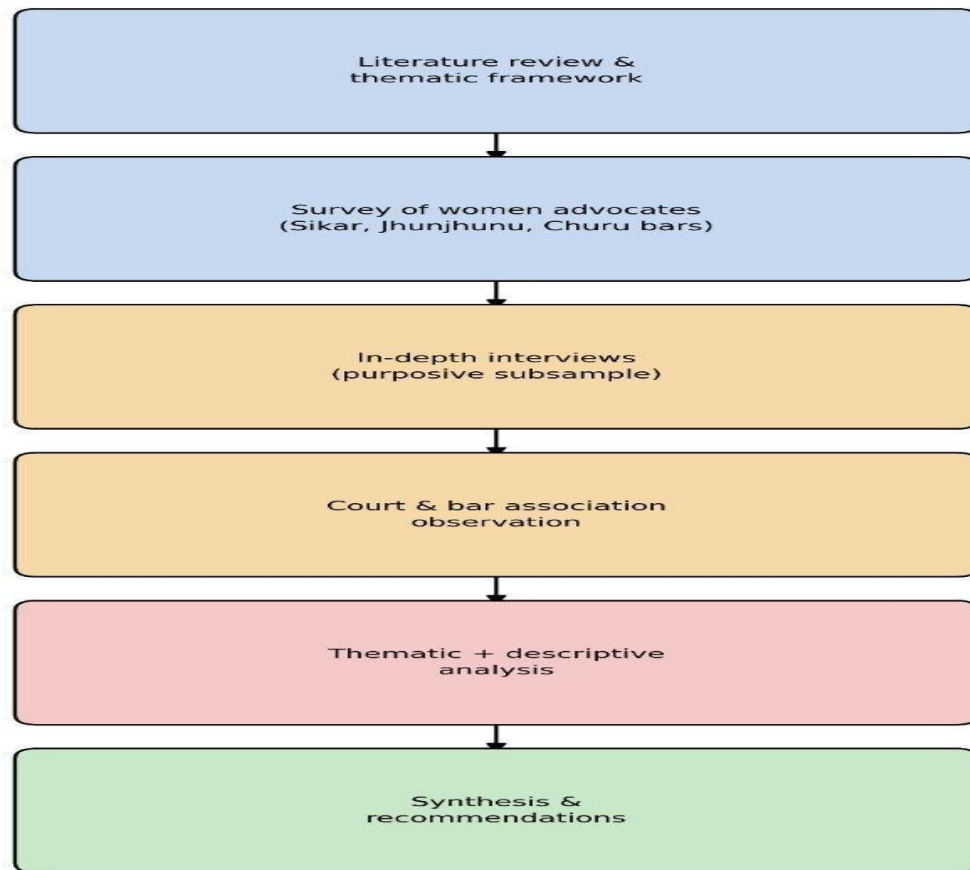


Figure 2. Proposed exploratory sequential mixed-methods design

5.2 Analysis and ethics

The coding of interview transcripts was conducted according to the framework constructed in Section 6, while the descriptive statistics obtained from the survey were used to profile the sample's characteristics, such as income, workload, and family arrangements. Ethical safeguards play an important role in this small professional community, which makes informed consent from interviewees compulsory. The anonymity of the participants must be ensured, and the characteristics must be combined in such a way that anonymity cannot be violated. Owing to the documented hostility towards women in courtrooms, specific interview techniques must be used in these contexts.

6. Mapping the Professional Challenges: A Thematic Synthesis

The thematic map below, prepared from the existing literature review, forms the analytical basis and framework for empirical validation in this study. The overall structure is shown in Figure 3.

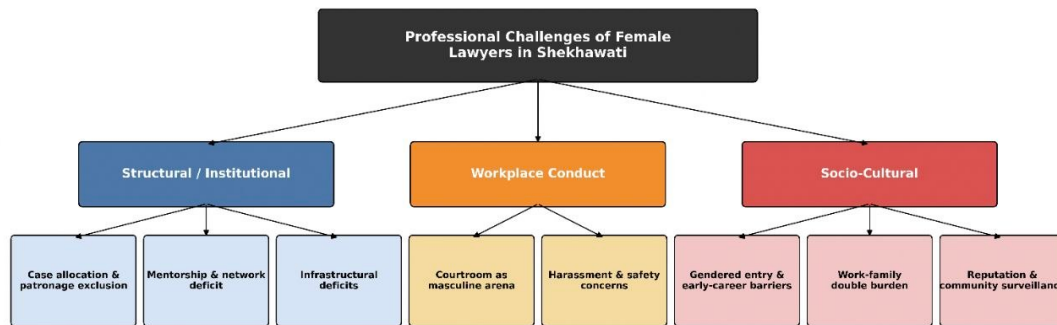


Figure 3. Thematic map of the professional challenges of female lawyers in Shekhawati

Table 1 Different themes and Challenges

Theme	Content of challenge
1. Entry and early-career barriers	Disparity between law-school enrolment and court presence; discouragement rooted in societal expectations
2. Courtroom as a masculine arena	Being talked over, ignored, disparaged; sexist remarks in open court; stereotyping
3. Work–family conflict	Double burden of long court hours and domestic responsibilities; career penalties of caregiving
4. Case allocation and income inequality	Exclusion from high-value cases; ghettoisation into lower-paid practice areas
5. Mentorship and network exclusion	Dependence on male-dominated patronage; exclusion from informal professional networks
6. Infrastructural deficits	Lack of separate facilities, childcare and harassment enforcement
7. Harassment and safety	Sexual harassment by colleagues and litigants; disrespect from police and clients
8. Reputation and community surveillance	Visibility as a professional woman in a conservative community; honour-based social control

6.1 Gendered entry and early-career barriers

Before entering practice, women face their first challenge. This challenge generally develops due to existing societal norms and patriarchal expectations, which determine the job opportunities available to women and limit their choices regarding their professional lives after they start their education. In conservative areas, even the choice of whether to pursue a career in litigation rather than go into teaching or take up a non-litigation job may lead to disputes within the family. Once the process of gaining a legal education starts, women are faced with the situation where, although entry into the profession is equal, progression is not.

6.2 The courtroom as a masculine arena

The courtroom's structure, protocols, and pace have a masculine representation. Female lawyers suffer from constant sexual discrimination in the form of being talked down to, ignored, and made fun of. Ethnographical studies indicate that women lawyers can face sexist remarks even in open court hearings. Gender-based prejudices are so frequent that the belief that women need “to be reasonable” influences allegations. In case a woman lawyer shows up

in front of a jury of men in a small district court, she must pay the price of showing the status of a lawyer.

6.3 Work–family conflict and the double burden

Litigation requires long and unpredictable hours; there is a clear correlation between family structures in patriarchal settings, whereby caregiving, home upkeep, and societal roles are usually assigned to women. Research on Indian female lawyers reveals this ongoing clash of work and family demands that renders women virtually invisible, especially during critical junctures of family life. Comparative studies point out that the difficulties of combining work and family "underpin women's employment and earning disadvantages" and that mothers face different kinds of scheduling penalties. In Shekhawati, where extended families, patrilocal residence, and strict gender role distribution are prevalent, the court schedule of a female lawyer remains secondary to her domestic obligations, thereby greatly reducing her chances of engaging in early morning and late-evening hours, which are essential in building a career in litigation.

6.4 Case allocation, patronage and income inequality

In a small bar, the accessibility of briefs is controlled by senior practitioners, with studies on women in the legal profession showing segregation from high-value cases as a main issue of concern, alongside the findings from around the world that show women being pushed into less lucrative branches of practice and men dominating better-paying fields of work. As a result, there is a gender pay gap in Britain, with the pay of female solicitors being 44% of male solicitors' salaries in private practice. In Shekhawati's legal market, which is not very significant, due to many litigations being controlled by senior male advocates, women's ability to obtain lucrative briefs is likely to depend either on family ties or on occupational areas that are marginalized.

6.5 Mentorship deficit and exclusion from professional networks

The extent of informal patronage systems and sponsorship practices in lawyers' careers shows that junior lawyers rely heavily on support from their more senior colleagues. Unlike their male counterparts, who are mentored by other men representing the vast majority in positions of power, female lawyers lack access to informal legal networks established primarily by men in male-oriented environments, such as courts, social events, and other gatherings where only men meet. The challenges of mentorship are well documented across the Indian legal system, and the idea of a close-knit bar in a small town reinforces the constraints faced by women in terms of professional networking.

6.6 Infrastructural and institutional deficits

Judicial complexes situated in district areas suffer from the absence of several facilities. For example, women have no separate restrooms, waiting areas, or arrangements for childcare. The absence of such infrastructure leads to a negative experience every day, especially in smaller courts that lack alternatives. Complaint mechanisms, that is, the commissions to file complaints, procedures for grievances, enforcement of anti-sexual harassment legislations, and so on, exist on paper in some of the judicial bars, which is rather ironic for Rajasthan, the birthplace of the Vishaka guidelines.

6.7 Harassment and safety concerns

Research on culture in patriarchal countries shows that women lawyers face sexist harassment and discrimination from their colleagues as well as clients, police, and sometimes judges. Evidence obtained through surveys shows that many women define certain types of joking and ridicule, limited access to management and positions of judges, and attitudes of judiciary as discrimination.

Court environments in districts with many litigants, criminals, and police create safety issues for women regarding their travel, evening visits, and communication with clients in public places. Fear of damaging their reputation makes women reluctant to formally complain about the issue.

6.8 Reputation, stigma and community surveillance

The sociological uniqueness of the Shekhawati context is emphasized in this final theme. In patriarchal settings, people tend to associate women's autonomy and visibility with immorality; thus, women working in public (e.g., professionals who serve male clients) are

tarnished by gossip and subjected to mechanisms of honor-based social control. Social structure governs women's behavior in Rajasthan and enforces traditional gender norms through coercion and violence; there is ample evidence of women being powerless in patriarchal households. The agency of women is strictly confined to the frameworks of intersectionality between patriarchy and caste, and the norms of patriarchy greatly influence the education, work, and social status of women. Therefore, for a female lawyer, every professional activity (such as meeting a client or being present in court) means facing hidden threats from the community.

7. Discussion

The eight themes combined imply that the female lawyer in Shekhawati is in a complicated position. The profession requires qualities that are characteristic of the ideal worker being available all the time, being publicly present and competitive but the regional gender order punishes these qualities in women. Her career thus represents a continuous process of negotiating similarities and differences between two sets of norms, that is, legal regulations that provide for equality and patriarchal traditional norms of society.

The studies cited above discuss possible outcomes. One of them is attrition, or the exit from adversarial practice of those who cannot effectively manage their double role, that is, women lawyers who decide to work in teaching, non-litigation field, or stay at home. Another possible outcome is segmentation: women tend to specialize in family law or other fields that are traditional for women, thus experiencing limitations in income and promotion opportunities. Finally, the permanent presence of only a few women in the legal profession leads to stratification, that is, the fact that women, who have decided to remain in the profession, are not promoted to the position of senior lawyers or judges in the future.

This stratification can be seen even at the entrance of the judiciary level, where variations among state courts are huge. According to the 2023 report of the Supreme Court titled State of the Judiciary, women constitute 36.3 percent of the judges of the lower courts in the country; however, the figures are not evenly distributed: Goa stands first with 70 percent female judges in the district courts, followed by Meghalaya at 62.7 percent, Telangana at 52.8 percent, and Sikkim at 52.4 percent, while some states do not measure up. Looking at the difference between these statistics and the low percentages of female judges represented in the Supreme Court (2.9-3.1 percent) and High Court (14 percent) (Pandey & Khalid, 2026). In states with traditional gender roles like Rajasthan, the number of women represented in the lower tiers of the judiciary and the profession that feeds this judiciary is probably the smallest.

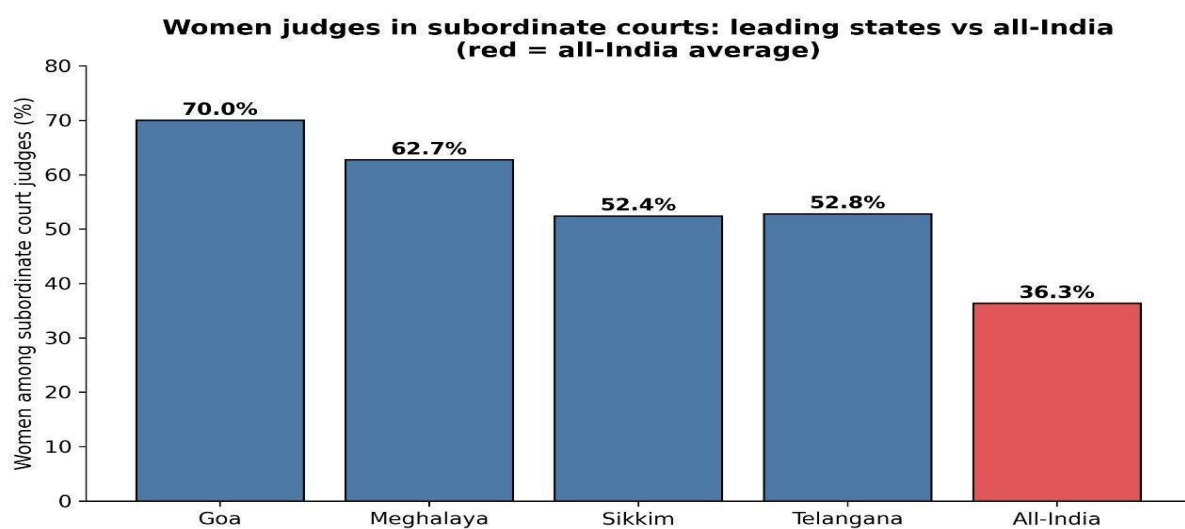


Figure 4. Women among subordinate court judges: leading states compared with the all-India average of 36.3 per cent (red bar). Source: (Kaur, 2025).

However, the agency framework advises us against interpreting it from a victim-centered point of view. Women lawyers in such circumstances create advanced ways of dealing with the situation: connections with relatives that turn into professional benefits, conscious building of a reputation of being strict and decent as a protection, depending upon female customers, and mutual support in an elite group of female lawyers. Organizing at the bar level, mentoring programs, and running reforms are all means of transforming individual strategies into collective ones.

8. Future Research

Based on the aforementioned themes and suggestions made for reforms according to the literature, the following strategies are recommended:

- 1) Activities of bar associations: establishment of women's cell in district's bar association; ensuring adequate representation of women in bar council and bar association leading bodies through reserved seats and the Supreme Court's 30% quota for bar councils (Pandey & Khalid, 2026).
- 2) Infrastructure-related changes: providing separate toilets, a safe waiting area, and childcare center in court complexes.
- 3) Implementation of mechanisms against harassments: working internal complaint committee and gender awareness programs for judges, lawyers, and court employees.
- 4) Mentoring and networking: establishing a formal mentorship through pairing junior women lawyers with experienced practitioners, creating different spaces for professional interaction that do not require male social interaction.
- 5) Researches and studies: regular collecting of data regarding gender characteristics of enrollment, retention and case assignment in the district bar associations and identifying problems in this area at national level.

9. Conclusion

To comprehend the peculiar challenges that female lawyers tend to face in Shekhawati, we must consider them not merely as a string of complaints that women lawyers voice at the workplace but rather as a consequence of a particular social structure: a gendered profession that operates based on patronage within an ancient patriarchal system. All the issues analyzed in this study—obstacles to female entry to the profession, harassment in court, work–family balance issues, exclusion from professional networks, and controlling female behavior at the community level — show that the underlying tension discussed here is the same in every case. Apart from affecting women lawyers, the existence of such barriers has implications for the surrounding community: when female lawyers discontinue their professional careers, the legal profession becomes devoid of diversity, the litigants (including female litigants) are deprived of legal assistance, and the system of justice loses its efficiency. By situating the gender analysis in “adjacent” bars of Northern India and taking Shekhawati as a typical example of such locations, the authors add to sociology's understanding of the legal profession and the contemporary mechanism of patriarchy.

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