

Role of Family Court in Odisha Ensuring Justice in Furtherance of Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines Family Courts Act 1984 in Odisha, focusing on its implementation and effects. The Family Court Act 1984 aims to provide quick and effective resolutions for family issues while supporting personal security and maintaining family ties. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, gathering feedback from litigants, judges, lawyers, and NGO staff for better understanding of the impact of the Act. It highlights the constitutional foundations of the Act and emphasizes resolving conflicts amicably through mediation instead of conventional legal processes. Family Courts prioritize relationships and welfare of children in dispute resolution. Despite these goals, challenges in this legal process, such as delays, lack of awareness, and procedural complexities hinder effective implementation of the Act. The research compares how Family Courts operate across different districts and shows variations in response times and case resolutions. Recommendations are given to improve the Act's effectiveness which includes simplifying procedures, reducing delays, and aligning with gender justice goals. The study calls for ongoing monitoring of Family Courts to ensure successful implementation and uphold gender equality rights. It aims to aid legislators, judges, and organizations committed to gender justice and resolving family disputes, ultimately helping to maintain family bonds.

Keywords: Family Court Act, Justice for woman, speedy settlement of disputes, Constitutional Right.

INTRODUCTION

The human beings from the primitive are social animal. They develop the society and the said society help them to be what they intend to become or what they can be. Thousands of year ago, the human beings were helpless creatures but slowly eliminating the unhappy ambiance they devised a subtle way of living in a society and then 'the family' came into picture. The society is the mixture of small, similar or different units called family. The family came into existence by union of man and woman through an institution called marriage and create other members of the family unit. Thus family and marriage are complementary to each other and they are the oldest and most important institutions of the society. This association in a family by man and woman who are known as husband and wife after marriage provide each other the social and personal security. The responsibility of children, growth and development of family members, interdependency between all of them, nourishment of children, regulation of social life and preservation of their families' social and cultural tradition are some of the responsibilities and requirements of a family.

Rationale of the study:

The policy makers to think and enact certain law particularly relating to personal matters like "marriage, divorce and Succession etc" in order to protect the interest and safeguard the wellbeing of women. The National Commission for Women Act, 1992 was enacted to monitor, examine and investigate matters relating to women, For the matters relating to dispute concerning marriage and their family affairs etc. a movement began to have a separate alternative dispute mechanism to help these helpless women which resulted in the enactment of "The Family Courts Act in the year 1984 for speedy settlement of family disputes." This legislation is more concerned with the conciliation between the husband and wife with the dominant purpose

of preserving the institution of marriage and promoting the welfare of the children.” The Preamble to the Family Courts Act states the objective of the Family Court as “An Act to provide for the establishment of Family Courts with a view to promote conciliation in, and secure, speedy settlement of disputes relating to marriage and family affairs and for matters connected therewith.” Thus, family courts are “special courts designed to deal with legal problems arising out of the family.” In family courts, the family disputes are resolved through counselling and less legalistic methods. It has adopted easier approaches than what is adopted in the ordinary civil and criminal proceedings. Before introducing the family courts, family disputes were entertained in the civil courts. It prolonged the time of the separation of the couples and often resulted in the impossibility of the settlement of family disputes. In 1974, the 59th Law Commission stressed the urgent need of setting up the family courts and suggested the proceedings to matters concerning the family disputes.

Objectives of the Study:

The study on the quick and effective resolutions for family issues by family courts in Odisha have several critical objectives. The First Objective is to seek speedy settlement of disputes relating to wide range of family affairs and for matters connected therewith including issues related to marriage, divorce, guardianship of children, custody, and maintenance. Second objective is to evaluate family disputes through counselling and less legalistic methods. Third objective is to understand how the family courts facilitate for timely and fair resolutions of disputes. Fourth objective is to identify the challenges and area of improvement of the efficiency of the family courts as per the provisions of the Family Courts Act of 1984.

Methodology and Data Collection:

The methods adopted for this study are empirical and doctrinal. It is used for this research to understand the working of family courts in Odisha. Empirical research employs gathering of feedback from litigants, judges, lawyers, and NGO staff for better understanding of the impact of the Act. Doctrinal research includes analysis of Judgments, legal principles, and judicial precedents relating to proceedings of family courts, review of relevant statutes. The study is made in collecting data from both primary sources and secondary sources. The study also contains internet resources. Sampling technique, questionnaire design, reliability measures, and statistical assumptions have been followed and it is reflected in its detailed report. The present article is merely focusing on the effectiveness of Family Court. Under such circumstance, minimum attention has been given on field data and maximum efforts have been made on theoretical aspects.

After defining the research problem and outlining the research plan, the study reaches this stage. Primary data was gathered to analyse and interpret results to fulfil the study goals. The instrument employed for data collection was an interview schedule. The current study relies on both field and documentary sources. The primary source has formed the field sources. The secondary sources comprised published materials addressing the concerns, including books, journal articles, and official reports.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON FAMILY COURT IN INDIA

The subject matter jurisdiction of family courts is further clarified by the Explanation that is annexed to section 7 (1). The suits and proceedings mentioned in this sub-section are of the following nature: (a) a suit or proceeding between the parties to a marriage for a decree of nullity of marriage (declaring the marriage to be null and void or, as the case may be, annulling the marriage) or restitution of conjugal rights or judicial separation or dissolution of marriage; (b) a suit or proceeding for a declaration as to the validity of a marriage or as to the matrimonial status of any person; (c) a suit or proceeding between the parties to a marriage with respect to the property of the parties or of either of them; (d) a suit or proceeding for an order or injunction in circumstances arising out of a marital relationship; (e) a suit or proceeding for a declaration as to the legitimacy of any person; (f) a suit or proceeding for maintenance; (g) a suit or proceeding in relation to the guardianship of the person or the Custody of, or access to, any minor.

The Family Courts Act grants obligatory authority to state governments to establish family courts in urban areas with populations exceeding one million, while offering optional authority for regions below that

threshold. Nevertheless, certain states have not succeeded in establishing family courts; the justifications provided include financial limitations, spatial restrictions, and opposition from legal practitioners against such initiatives. The family court is currently addressing several issues related to gender discrimination, including the following:

i) Divorce : Family courts can make decisions on divorce disputes. Courts will make decisions on matters like child support, visitation, and custody. Furthermore, the courts have the authority to require divorcing spouses to try mediation to resolve their dispute. In actuality, mediation may assist couples in reaching amicable agreements on the equitable division of assets and property. In actuality, couples that successfully navigate their case through mediation frequently express more satisfaction with the outcome. Couples and children participating in court disputes often experience high levels of stress due to the procedure. On the other hand, some couples cannot come to a consensus through mediation or do not want to face their spouse face-to-face. In certain situations, all divorce-related decisions will be made by the courts. Couples with prenuptial or postnuptial agreements are also prohibited from acting further unless a judge upholds all or a portion of the arrangement. In actuality, the family court system will need to address some matters, even for couples who have such agreements.

ii) Domestic Violence : Domestic abuse cases are heard in family courts. In reality, the number of domestic abuse instances recorded each year has climbed dramatically over the world. This is due in part to some jurisdictions' legal authority to bring charges even without the victim's assent. Previously, victims had to file charges to have the abuser charged. Domestic violence perpetrators might suffer legal and financial consequences. Furthermore, individuals who have experienced abuse may pursue protective or restraining orders that restrict the abuser's access to them. States possess the authority to issue such orders independently of the victim's consent. In certain instances, individuals who have committed abuse have faced charges, despite the victim's consent to their presence. Cases of domestic violence encompass numerous intricate elements, particularly the psychological impact on the victim. In light of the acknowledgement of these factors, numerous states have obtained the legal authority to address domestic violence cases even without the victim's consent. Courts have indeed rendered decisions without the necessity of a victim's testimony.

iii) Marriage: Many family court cases have marriage at their core. Family court action is required in many households to defend women's rights at various times following marriage. If the state accepts common law marriage, family courts may also get engaged in weddings. The validity of the partnership as a marriage may be contested by one or both spouses, particularly if they felt they were only cohabitating and not married. A family law court may also examine the legality of the couple's marriage certificate application. In a divorce case, a marriage may also be investigated if one of the spouses argues that the union is illegal and has no legal foundation. The courts may decide that an annulment is required in such a situation.

iv) Adoption: Families looking to adopt children come in a variety of forms. In actuality, depending on their state's family laws, same-sex couples and single people may want to adopt children but may not be permitted to. The adoption rules of several states are sometimes vague or confusing. In such a circumstance, the outcome of an adoption case is often determined by the judge's discretion and precedent. Judges in jurisdictions with clear and stringent adoption laws have limited leeway to make personal judgments, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the result. The decision to adopt a child is always based on what is best for the child; however, there are many different reasons why people do it.

v) Child Support: In every case involving child support, the courts treat the matter separately. Actually, child support obligations are not limited to non custodial parents. To illustrate the point, there are situations where the custodial parent is required to pay for the child's participation in extracurricular activities when they are with the noncustodial parent.

vi) Married Woman Key Rights:

Marriage serves as a fundamental institution that unites individuals and families within society. Some individuals successfully navigate married life, while others find it to be a challenging and distressing

experience. Numerous instances exist in which women endure prolonged atrocities due to a lack of awareness regarding their rights. This episode will discuss the legal rights in India that have been established to protect women's interests, which are essential for everyone to understand.

a) Right to Streedhan: A woman is entitled to all of her streedhan, including gifts and money given to her both before and after marriage. The ownership right to streedhan belongs to the wife, even if it is placed in the custody of her husband or her in-laws. According to Section 14 of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 and Section 27 of the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, a woman is entitled to claim the right and ownership of her streedhan. In the event of a breach of this right, she may submit a complaint pursuant to Section 19A of The Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act.

b) Rights of Streedhan related to Women

- A woman possesses her unique attributes, and no one else holds the authority to seize or claim her rights from you.
- The woman possesses the complete authority to retain it, manage its storage under her jurisdiction, and utilize it as she sees fit. This right is inherently yours and cannot be stripped away by anyone.

A woman finds herself in a position to depart from her matrimonial residence, she is entitled to bring her female companion along.

c) Right to live in the matrimonial home or husband's house: A wife possesses the entitlement to inhabit the matrimonial residence alongside her husband, regardless of whether the dwelling is ancestral, part of a joint family, self-acquired, or rented. A wife possesses the unequivocal right to reside in the matrimonial abode or that of her in-laws. Regardless of the circumstances, including the passing of her husband, a wife retains the possibility of residing with her in-laws. In the event that a divorce has been initiated, it is permissible for a wife to continue residing in her husband's home until she secures an appropriate alternative accommodation. Should the woman choose to remain in the same residence, it is indeed within her legal entitlements to do so.

d) Right to a Committed relationship: A Hindu spouse must be formally divorced before he can have an affair or wed another woman. If a spouse has a connection with another married woman, he may be accused of adultery. Due to his extramarital affair, his wife is also entitled to petition for divorce.

e) Right to Divorce: Suppose a husband commits adultery, cruelty, or psychological or physical torture against his wife, etc.. In that case, she can divorce him even without his permission, according to section 13 of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. This allows the wife to require her husband to pay a maintenance levy legally. In cases when the husband has a higher income, a woman might seek financial support from him under section 125 of the "Indian Penal Code" to support herself and their child.

f) Right to Dignity & Self-Respect: Wives have the right to live honorably and to adopt the same lifestyle as their husbands and in-laws. She is also entitled to be free from physical and psychological abuse. According to her husband's living standards, a woman has the right to reasonable living conditions and basic amenities.

g) Right to Child Maintenance: The husband and wife must support the minor kid. The husband must help the wife financially if she cannot work or sustain herself. If both parents cannot support their kid financially, they may turn to the grandparents for assistance. Additionally, a minor child can request a division of ancestral property.

h) Right to custody of the child: A lady is perfectly entitled to want custody of her child. Particularly if the youngster is under five years old, she can take her kid with her if she leaves her mother-in-law without a court order. This allows the mother to retain custody of her kid in the event of a domestic conflict, even if she is granted the same custody rights.

i) Right to abortion: This gives a mother the authority to abort her unborn child. She can do this without her husband's or mother-in-law's approval. A woman may terminate her pregnancy at any moment under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, provided that the pregnancy is shorter than 24 weeks. The Indian Court has granted a woman the right to have her pregnancy terminated in some exceptional circumstances, even if it is 24 weeks along.

j) Property Right : In light of the amendment to The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, in 2005, it is now established that a daughter, regardless of her marital status, possesses an equal entitlement to her father's property. This enables the woman to claim her entitlement to the property belonging to her former husband. Nonetheless, this remains feasible provided that her husband has not executed a will to dispossess her of her property. In such a scenario, if a man enters into a second marriage without first obtaining a divorce, the first wife retains rights to the entirety of the husband's property.

FAMILY COURT IN ODISHA

The primary objective of family courts is to provide a forum where disputes affecting the core of personal and family life can be resolved with dignity, speed, and fairness. At its heart, the institution seeks to reduce adversarial conflict and replace it with dialogue and conciliation, thereby mitigating the trauma often associated with litigation. The objective extends beyond mere adjudication to the promotion of social harmony, gender equality, and child welfare. By simplifying procedures, minimising legal technicalities, and encouraging direct engagement between parties, family courts strive to make justice more accessible and humane. They also reflect India's constitutional commitment to ensuring equality before the law and protecting vulnerable groups from exploitation or neglect. The broader objective is thus both individual and collective: to safeguard the rights of spouses, children, and dependents while upholding the social institution of family as a cornerstone of society. In Odisha, as in other states, the functioning of family courts is guided by these objectives, even though challenges in infrastructure and practice sometimes impede their fulfilment.

Pendency Position in Family Courts in Odisha: However, case processing speed, and backlog-handling effectiveness in the Family Courts of Odisha as on 30th Sept, 2014 has been taken from the website and placed as below.

Institution, Disposal & Pendency of Cases In the Family Courts of the State (Orissa) as on 30th September, 2024.

| Sl. No. | Name of the Judgeship | RDC Zone | Pendency Position in Family Courts | | | |
|---------|-----------------------|----------|------------------------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| | | | Opening Balance | Institution | Disposal | Pendency |
| 1 | Angul | N | 429 | 42 | 47 | 424 |
| 2 | Bolangir | N | 425 | 41 | 43 | 423 |
| 3 | Bargarh | N | 1064 | 51 | 158 | 957 |
| 4 | Deogarh | N | 66 | 10 | 12 | 64 |
| 5 | Dhenkanal | N | 550 | 95 | 93 | 552 |
| 6 | Jharsuguda | N | 254 | 41 | 53 | 242 |
| 7 | Keonjhar | N | 1380 | 58 | 159 | 1279 |
| 8 | Sambalpur | N | 333 | 54 | 55 | 332 |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|----------------------|---|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| 9 | Sonepur | N | 131 | 21 | 24 | 128 |
| 10 | Sundargarh | N | 950 | 84 | 136 | 898 |
| | Sub-Total (N) | | 5582 | 497 | 780 | 5299 |
| 11 | Balasore | C | 4441 | 260 | 293 | 4408 |
| 12 | Bhadrak | C | 2141 | 161 | 164 | 2138 |
| 13 | Cuttack | C | 2705 | 226 | 244 | 2687 |
| 14 | Jagatsinghpur | C | 1068 | 119 | 93 | 1094 |
| 15 | Jajpur | C | 1702 | 163 | 282 | 1583 |
| 16 | Kendrapara | C | 2632 | 149 | 75 | 2706 |
| 17 | Khurda | C | 7391 | 501 | 647 | 7245 |
| 18 | Mayurbhanj | C | 1058 | 111 | 145 | 1024 |
| 19 | Nayagarh | C | 1446 | 107 | 93 | 1460 |
| 20 | Puri | C | 1150 | 131 | 159 | 1122 |
| | Sub-Total (C) | | 25734 | 1928 | 2195 | 25467 |
| 21 | Boudh | S | 160 | 24 | 32 | 152 |
| 22 | Gajapati | S | 55 | 34 | 27 | 62 |
| 23 | Ganjam | S | 2517 | 185 | 167 | 2535 |
| 24 | Kalahandi | S | 226 | 25 | 26 | 225 |
| 25 | Kandhamal | S | 244 | 38 | 37 | 245 |
| 26 | Koraput | S | 433 | 46 | 62 | 417 |
| 27 | Nabarangpur | S | 163 | 47 | 36 | 174 |
| 28 | Rayagada | S | 114 | 37 | 33 | 118 |
| | Sub-Total (S) | | 3912 | 436 | 420 | 3928 |
| TOTAL | | | 35228 | 2861 | 3395 | 34694 |

The above tables shows about districtwide data relating to case processing in Odisha at Family courts in Odisha. However, the above districts are coming under three Administrative Revenue Divisions. They are:

- 1) **Northern Division (N):** Angul, Balangir (Bolangir), Bargarh, Deogarh, Dhenkanal, Jharsuguda, Kendujhar (Keonjhar), Sambalpur, Subarnapur (Sonepur), and Sundargarh.

- 2) **Central Division (C):** Balasore, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Jagatsinghapur, Jajpur, Kendrapara, Khordha, Mayurbhanj, Nayagarh, and Puri.
- 3) **Southern Division (S):** Boudh, Gajapati, Ganjam, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Nuapada, and Rayagada.

To gain a deeper understanding of the functioning of Family Courts in Odisha, it was considered essential to undertake a comparative analysis of the perceptions of two critical stakeholders: the legal functionaries (including judges, court staff, and lawyers) and the litigants who directly engage with the system. While the legal functionaries reflect the institutional standpoint, litigants represent the voices of those for whom the Family Courts are primarily intended.

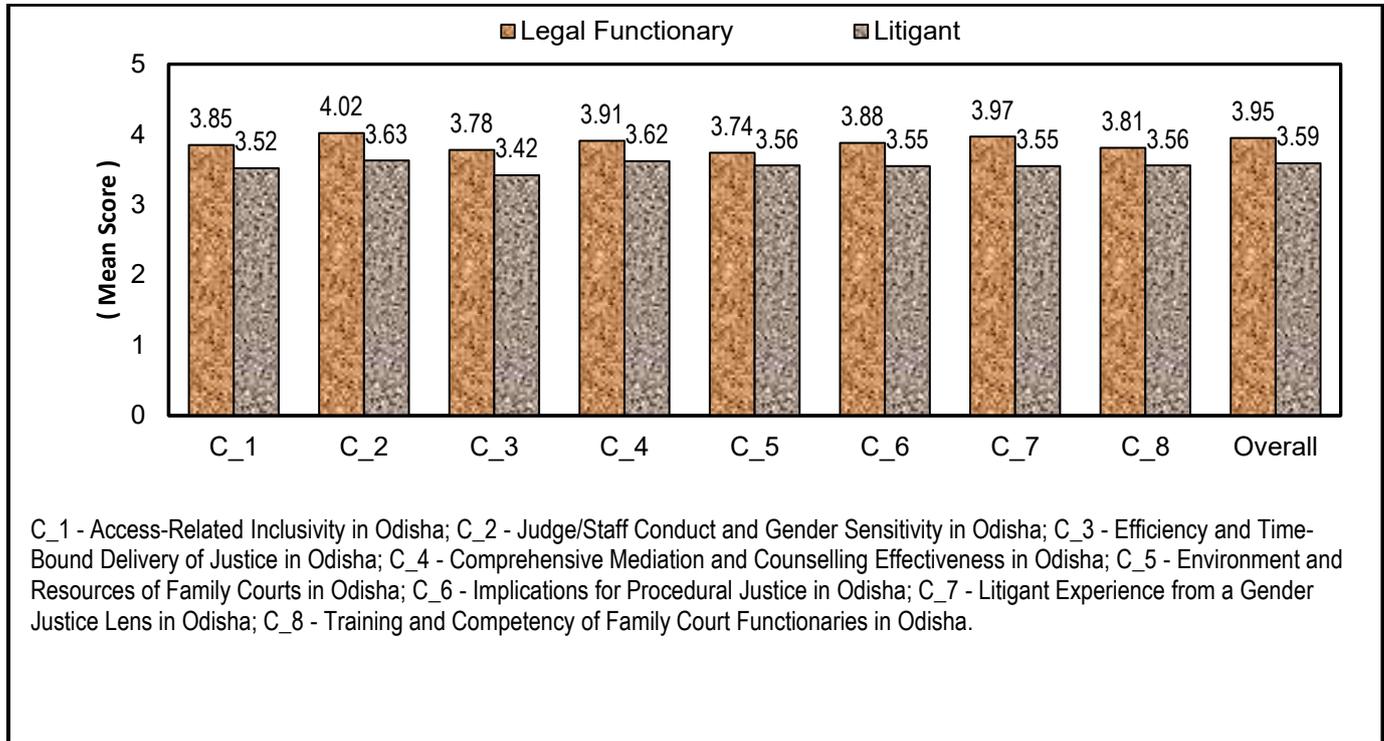
The following table presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and t-test results across multiple dimensions such as accessibility, gender sensitivity, efficiency, mediation, procedural justice, and overall functioning of Family Courts. This analysis enables the identification of areas where institutional perceptions align with or diverge from litigants’ experiences, thereby providing an empirical basis for evaluating the effectiveness of Family Courts in furtherance of justice and gender equality.

Comparative Analysis Showing Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results of Legal Functionaries, and Litigants on Functioning of Family Courts in Odisha.

| | Groups | N | Mean | SD | t-value |
|---|-------------------|-----|------|------|--------------------|
| Access-Related Inclusivity in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.85 | 0.64 | 2.47* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.52 | 0.71 | |
| Judge/Staff Conduct and Gender Sensitivity in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 4.02 | 0.59 | 3.11* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.63 | 0.74 | |
| Efficiency and Time-Bound Delivery of Justice in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.78 | 0.68 | 2.62* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.42 | 0.73 | |
| Comprehensive Mediation and Counselling Effectiveness in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.91 | 0.66 | 2.28* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.62 | 0.71 | |
| Environment and Resources of Family Courts in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.74 | 0.63 | 1.92 ^{NS} |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.56 | 0.69 | |
| Implications for Procedural Justice in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.88 | 0.61 | 2.73* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.55 | 0.7 | |
| Litigant Experience from a Gender Justice Lens in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.97 | 0.6 | 3.34* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.55 | 0.72 | |
| Training and Competency of Family | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.81 | 0.65 | 2.18* |

| | | | | | |
|---|-------------------|-----|------|------|-------|
| Court Functionaries in Odisha | Litigant | 180 | 3.56 | 0.7 | |
| Overall Opinion on Functioning of Family Courts in Odisha | Legal Functionary | 70 | 3.95 | 0.62 | 2.84* |
| | Litigant | 180 | 3.59 | 0.73 | |

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level (P<0.05), NS – Not Significant at 5% level (P>0.05) for DF=248.



Mean Scores of Legal Functionaries, and Litigants on Functioning of Family Courts in Odisha.

Accordingly, the hypothesis that “Higher pendency of cases with low settlement rate frustrate the objective of the Acts and results in delay and denial of justice to the victims” stands accepted. This inference is substantiated by the mean scores of 3.78 and 3.42, recorded respectively from legal functionaries and litigants, thereby reflecting consensus between both groups regarding concerns of efficiency and time-bound adjudication in Odisha. Similarly, the hypothesis that “The existing methods of mediation and counseling programmes are insufficient and ineffective for the settlement of family disputes” is also accepted. The mean scores of 3.91 and 3.62 from legal functionaries and litigants, respectively, confirm concurrence across both communities on the inadequacy of the current mediation and counseling mechanisms in ensuring effective resolution of family disputes in Odisha.

STUDY FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

In synthesis, the comparative analysis underscores that while Family Courts in Odisha have established themselves as specialized fora for matrimonial and family disputes, their effectiveness is perceived differently by institutional actors and litigants. The consistently higher ratings by legal functionaries suggest confidence in the system’s structural design and procedural safeguards. However, the comparatively lower assessments by litigants reveal that justice delivery, when evaluated from the standpoint of accessibility, gender sensitivity, and experiential fairness, remains uneven. This divergence is not merely perceptual but carries substantive implications for the legitimacy of the Family Courts as instruments of social justice. In the context of SDG 5, which emphasizes gender equality and the elimination of discrimination, the findings highlight the urgent need for reforms that prioritize litigant-centric approaches, enhance trust-building measures, and ensure that procedural guarantees are meaningfully realized in practice. Only by bridging this perceptual gap can Family

Courts in Odisha fulfill their mandate of delivering justice that is not only legally sound but also socially responsive and gender-just.

The findings reveal that protective legislation and matrimonial laws in Odisha provide a reasonably sound framework, yet awareness and accessibility remain uneven. While many respondents acknowledge that laws promote gender equity and women's welfare, lingering doubts leading to too many pendency of cases. Delays and inconsistencies in practical application weaken public trust, indicating that statutory intent often struggles to find its way into meaningful justice. Family Courts are recognized as integrating protective provisions, but uneven awareness among litigants and officials exposes a pressing need for continuous legal literacy and institutional training.

Therefore, the foremost suggestion for disposal of huge pending family litigation is as follows:

- To ensure that the promise of law translates into meaningful justice, Family Courts must address procedural barriers and enhance enforceability of protective legislation.
- Cut through procedural red tape by simplifying filing processes and reducing technical hurdles that discourage litigants.
- Enforce strict timelines to minimize adjournments and delays, thereby strengthening confidence in timely justice delivery.
- Translate statutory intent into action by ensuring uniform enforcement of matrimonial and protective laws.

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