

iProbono



# TOWN HALL REPORT

Unheard Obstacles Faced by  
Bangladeshi Law Students:  
Reflections of the Community



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## BACKGROUND

Arpeeta Shams Mizan, iProbono's Senior Legal Officer in Bangladesh, was selected **as one of the 24 Global Fellows of the Goldin Institute in Chicago, USA**, in August 2021. The programme equips fellows to focus on collective leadership, develop a growth mindset, and to transition from a problem-oriented to an appreciative mindset.

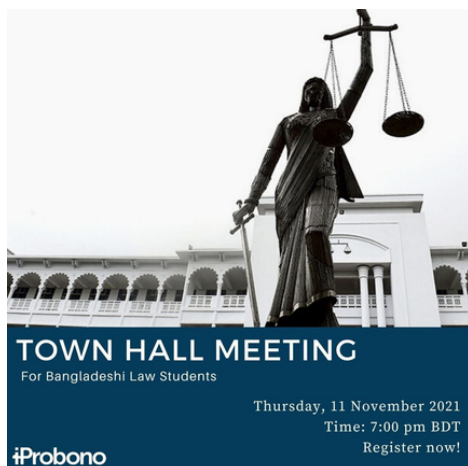
Arpeeta organised a 'Community Visioning Summit', as part of her fellowship, for members of her community to come together to reflect on their common concerns, shared perspectives, and community assets. The project's local partner was iProbono. Here is a brief rundown of the Summit.

The Community Visioning Summit was held virtually on 11 November 2021 for law students. The law students of Bangladesh, are not a geographically defined community (i.e. they are not limited to any particular region within Bangladesh). Rather, they are defined by a shared vision and identity. We held the summit remotely to ensure participation of law students from all parts of Bangladesh.

# PREPARATION

Our core team, Sayeed Hossain Sarwar and Ali Mashraf from iProbono Bangladesh and Abdullah Al Bukhari, law student, University of Dhaka, began the preparations. We conducted a community walk to reassess the availability of community resources, to create a community asset map that identifies what assets (physical and intangible) law students may already have, and held planning meetings.

We reached out to law schools through **posters** that were shared on our social media channels and distributed on the campus. By choosing to refer to it as a ‘Town Hall Meeting’, we wanted to ensure that the goals of the summit are clear to the audience.



#### WHO IS IT FOR?

Do you consider yourself to be a law student? If that's the case, this Town Hall is for you! It does NOT matter if you are an undergraduate or graduate student, or if you attended a public, private or nationwide university.

#### WHY SHOULD WE ATTEND?

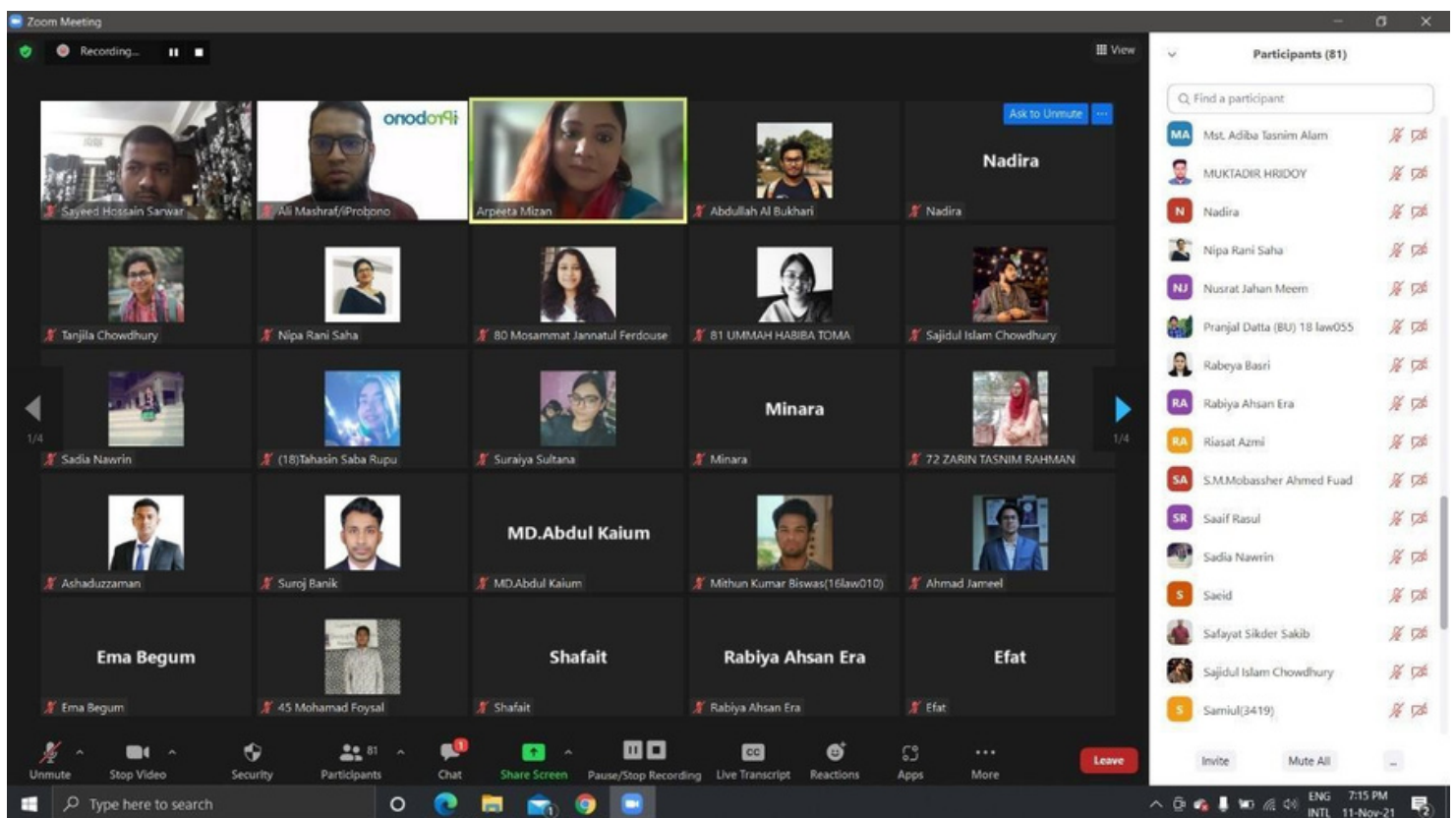
Even after graduation, law students are told that they lack the necessary skills. This is something we've heard from senior lawyers, employers, teachers, and even members of the general public.

We are interested in hearing from law students who feel underrepresented, unheard or undervalued. Your feedback will help us adapt clinical legal education programmes (such as street law, mooting, law clinic etc) to help other law students enhance their skills.

We wanted to hear from the unsung heroes: law students who rarely leave the classroom or participate in community activities, or those who are uncomfortable to speak up, and so on.

We also circulated the poster in Bangla to make the process more inclusive and ensure wider participation.

We planned an **agenda** for the summit, assigned duties among our team members, and created two polls to instantly obtain community feedback on current issues. We were pleased to note that over 80% of the 210 registered participants attended the summit.



## THE SUMMIT

We commenced the session with a poll question to understand how members of the community identified existing challenges and whether they had a problem-solving mindset. We were very interested in gauging whether law students perceived themselves as a community: a connected entity. The results of the survey were very enlightening. There were differing viewpoints but we discovered that law students see themselves as a community. We were concerned about the existing impressions and had prepared a discussion section to explore how law students can be a common entity. However, after the poll, we decided to skip that section.

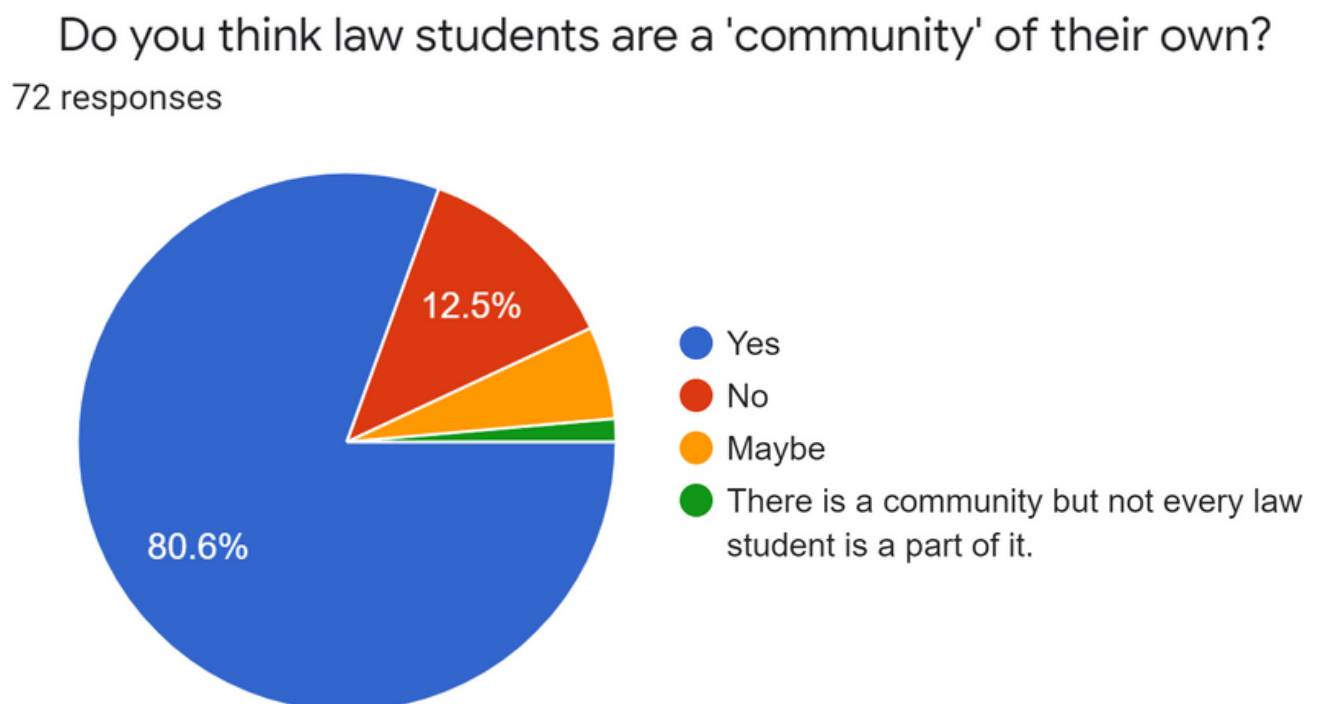


Figure 1: Law students' perception on community.

## THE UNHEARD VOICES

We were also curious to know why some students do not participate in community activities (i.e. extra-curricular Activities (ECAs) outside the classroom). We learnt that while the majority considered that law schools were insufficient for gaining skills (leading to students enrolling in ECAs), other students were shy and uncomfortable participating in group activities. This effectively isolated them from the rest of the community.

2. Do you think extra curricular activities (ECAs) help law students gain such skills which traditional law school curriculum cannot provide?

72 responses

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

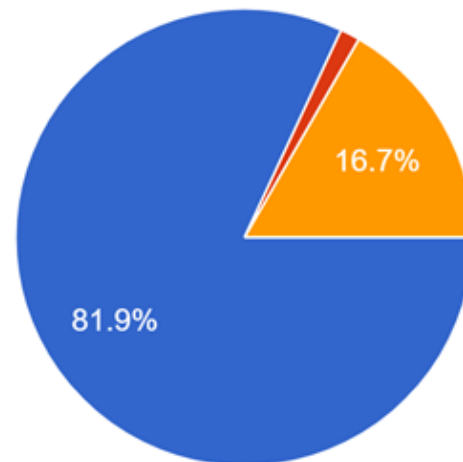


Figure 2: Law students' perception on extra-curricular activities

This helped us locate our target audience: people whose voices are underrepresented both within and outside the community.

3. Have you participated in any ECAs during your law school days?

72 responses

- Yes
- No

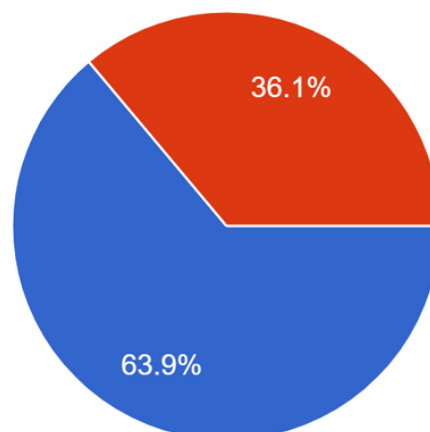


Figure 3: Demography of participants who did not take part in any ECAs earlier

## ECAs: BOON OR BANE?

7. If you did not participate in ECAs during your law school life, what was the reason?

72 responses

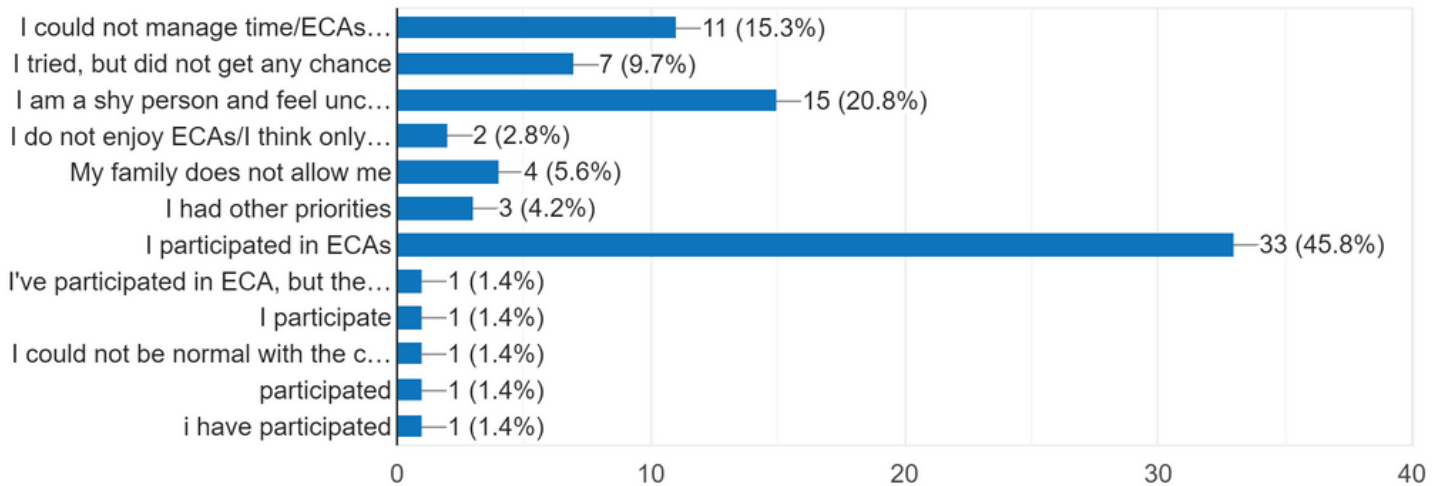


Figure 4: Barriers to law students' engagement beyond academics

A key focus of the town hall was to understand why many students avoid ECAs, which are pivotal in developing students' professional and networking skills. Students agreed that ECAs are beneficial to their skill development. Many of them participate in mooting, debate, Model United Nations (MUN), community service, singing, and dancing among other things. Most of the students, including those who have never attended an ECA, recognised the value of establishing a network between students and professionals to gain a practical perspective on the legal profession. But they also identified many challenges including:

- Grades are considered very important.
- Students' engagement is impacted by mental health difficulties.



- Communication barriers with law teachers.
- Lack of clear communication within the community/institution/group.
- There aren't enough foundational courses in the first few months of law school.
- Many students who were extroverted and enthusiastic prior to beginning university/law school experience impostor syndrome as a result of the new environment.
- Lack of connection between practice and theory in the curriculum, or even in ECAs, such as mootings/mock trial/workshops.
- The language of instruction and resources is primarily English. There are not enough resources in native languages.
- The distinction between urban students (residing in cities) and non-urban students (from remote areas of Bangladesh) is unfavourable to most non-urban students.
- Cultural shock, cultural adjustment.
- The public's view, as well as that of the media, has an impact on how new law students perceive law as it is practiced in the courts.
- There are many misconceptions and stereotypes regarding what 'studying law' entails.
- Professionals and even peers are unwilling to work together.
- Law students' reluctance to venture outside of their comfort zones.
- Students are unable to make an informed decision about whether or not law is a good match for them.

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)

We divided the participants into different breakout rooms, shared the community asset map and began the AI questioning. We gave participants a choice of questions to ask, and the majority chose the following:

1. Consider this scenario: by 2040, two Bangladeshi universities will have ranked in the top 100 of the QS World University Ranking and the Times Higher Education Ranking in terms of **impact**. Think about:

- What factors/actions might have aided in achieving such a distinguished position in the rankings?
- What bold decisions were made, and by whom, to establish the tone for this leadership?

2. Please talk about what you are good at with the people in your breakout room. (For example, singing, cooking, gardening, making friends/creating connections with people, organising, managerial abilities, writing, or anything else).

3. What do you value the most as a member of this community? What does this mean for your personal strengths and abilities?

4. What strengths, resources and gifts of the law student community should we be appreciating more? What can we do to learn more about them?

5. Consider the first time you attended an event, an assignment, an ECA, a mooted competition, a meeting or a workshop. What prompted you to participate? What do you intend to gain the most from such skills development?

6. What is it about which you are so enthusiastic that you would be willing to collaborate with others?

7. There are some skills that our law students excel at. How did they learn to be so good at what they do?

8. What can you do to make a difference? It does not have to be a major shift. What small, minute things may we accomplish in addition to huge things? (For example, I could go to class tomorrow and build a relationship with a classmate with whom I have never spoken).

The participants identified legal knowledge, critical thinking skills, and desire to do good for society as the community's most valuable assets. Most of them expressed a desire to perform community work, such as legal literacy and awareness building, pro bono legal services, and activities that strengthen their own community. This will benefit the legal community in two ways. Firstly, it will improve communication skills, insights, and empathy for common people. Secondly, it will foster trust between ordinary people and legal professionals.

We returned to the main session later and asked the participants for their final feedback before concluding the town hall.

## PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK

We gathered feedback from the participants after the summit. The feedback form was constructed utilising the qualitative method of 'attitude scales' to understand: a) the participants' ideas and b) how they rationalised their opinions. The feedback questions focused on the town hall's aims, activities, and how the participants felt about the process of community engagement. Some excerpts from the feedback forms are shown below.

Did you feel included during the group discussion?

45 responses

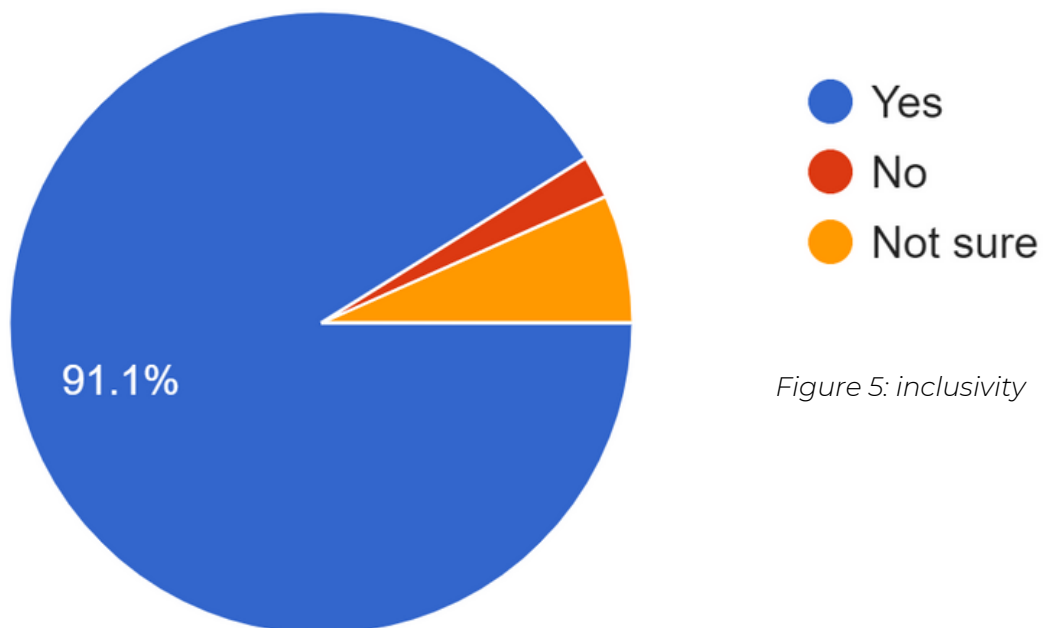


Figure 5: inclusivity

We gathered that the Asset Map provided new perspectives for many participants, and the AI questioning was insightful. They felt more connected, inspired and more willing to take action.

After today's session, do you feel more inspired as a law student?  
45 responses

- Yes
- No
- A little bit
- Absolutely yes

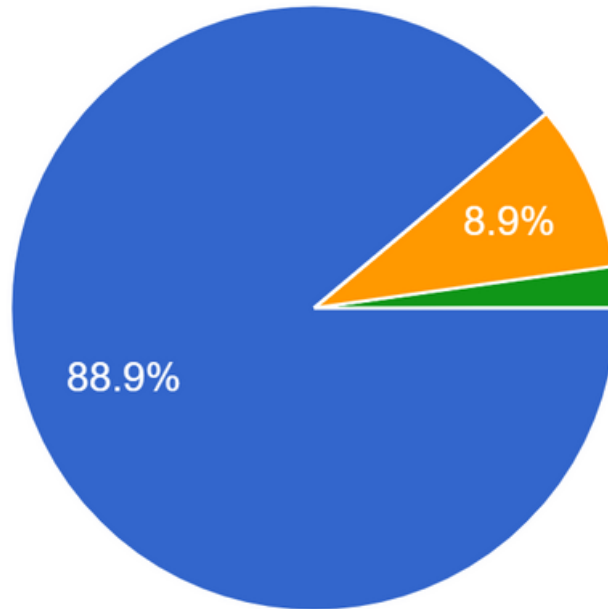


Figure 6: On feeling inspired after the town hall

Will you be taking any action individually or collectively?  
45 responses

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- Collectively through connection
- collectively if possible

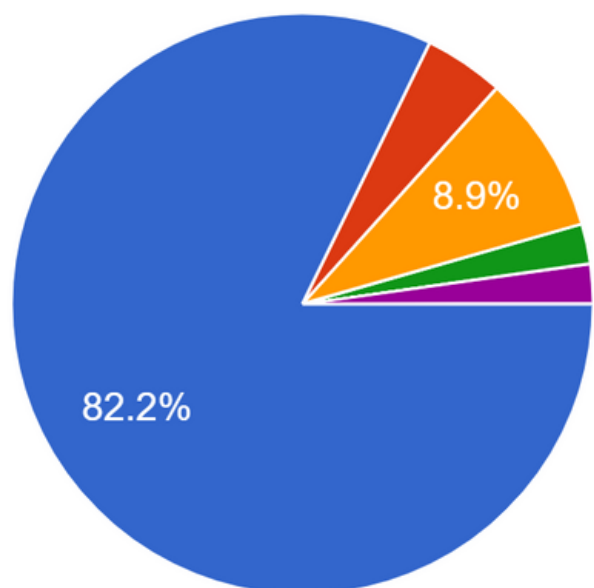


Figure 7: More students wanted to take action following the town hall

What aspects of the program were most useful or valuable?

45 responses

The idea that law students could be a community and help one other by doing community work is the most exciting one. Also, the appreciative enquiry was a thought-provoking one to think of from a different perspective.

Question and answer session

The asset mapping and later the group discussion segment were tremendously valuable, as we get to know about many other opportunities, problem solving ways and so on.

group discussions

The questions were given in today's program and the opportunity to talk about it was very important and very helpful.

Participate session

Opportunities for law students and active training for youngs minds guided me to have overwhelming

*Figure 8: Snippets of the aspects of the town hall that the students felt most useful*

## OUR LEARNINGS

We were astounded to observe how quickly AI can help people challenge their perceptions. Arpeeta noted that she gained perspectives that she could not have understood from classroom teaching alone. We believe that holding such visioning summits for law students on a yearly basis is beneficial. iProbono will continue to organise activities to involve the law student community and help them address some of the challenges they identified and develop their skills to succeed as law students and legal professionals.

We are looking to collaborate with Bangladeshi law schools and law student-based networks as a follow up to this effort. Please share your ideas and questions with Arpeeta Shams Mizan, iProbono's Senior Legal Officer, Bangladesh, at [arpeeta.mizan@i-probono.com](mailto:arpeeta.mizan@i-probono.com) or Ali Mashraf, iProbono's Program Officer, South Asia, at [ali.mashraf@i-probono.com](mailto:ali.mashraf@i-probono.com).

