

**iProbono**  
**GLOBAL**  
**IMPACT**  
**REPORT**  
**2023**



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To find out more about our work, visit [www.i-probono.com](http://www.i-probono.com)

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#### Disclaimer

Consent was taken for all the photographs taken by the iProbono team

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# A message from our CEO

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I am pleased to introduce this report, which sets out our work over the past financial year and also shares the impact this work has achieved. It has been a collaborative effort from our people at iProbono to decide which stories to share with you in these pages. At a time marked by global conflict and democratic regression, we believe that our work championing the rule of law, particularly in South Asia, has never been more crucial. Over the past year, we put the law to work to improve people's lives and this report shares some of these stories alongside our analysis of the impact we have achieved. Empathy, pragmatism and creativity inform everything we do and we know we need the tenacity to make sure we push boundaries in our space. You will see that we are always aware of and respond to our partners in the field and we are also realistic about our capacity to deliver on the promises we make.

When I joined iProbono in 2016 as a volunteer pro bono lawyer, I knew that there was great scope for us to reach the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people in our communities. Now as CEO, I'm proud to work with a global team that continues to enable people to access their rights in pursuit of a just society in spite of the growing pressure on the non-profit sector.

We are a global women and LGBT+ led legal social justice organisation, born out of the recognition that legal professionals have a responsibility to use their skills to serve and empower individuals and communities who require support. Our work across jurisdictions is inspired by the pursuit of a just society, and we estimate that our team has impacted the lives of over 2,000,000 people over the past one year through our access to justice program.

We know that despite sustained efforts by governments and civil society organisations, there is unequal access to justice in the jurisdictions where we work. In terms of ground realities, a privileged minority is able to understand and use the judicial system, while those who are vulnerable and under-represented are often left behind. While legal aid provisions and other attempts to provide adequate legal recourse exist, they have failed to bridge the gap. Not every vulnerable group or individual may qualify for legal aid. This means a substantial number of women, children, survivors of abuse, religious minorities, migrant workers and the disabled, to name a few, fall through the gaps. In line with this, we deliver professional development programs for legal service providers, engage with advocacy efforts and ensure changes in the law where we can to secure better outcomes for the communities we work with.

We anticipate that the year ahead will bring exacerbated challenges as our partners tackle a series of pressing concerns from protecting our environment to promoting the rights of vulnerable minority communities. iProbono will continue to deliver its mission and we look forward to doing this with you.



Mariam Faruqi  
CEO, iProbono  
Director, Justice Leila  
Seth Fellowship



## OUR IMPACT



**1433**

**people directly  
impacted via  
capacity-building  
initiatives and  
direct legal support**



**21**

**CSOs provided with  
direct legal support**



**2,124,099**

**people indirectly impacted via  
strategic litigation and advocacy**

## OUR NETWORK



**175**  
**Lawyers**



**28**  
**Partner  
Organisations**

# Bangladesh

## Delivering Justice to Dhaka's Street Children

Since December 2022, iProbono's panel of carefully selected advocates has been providing timely and high quality pro bono advice to people in need. In 2023, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police initiated a manhunt across the city after a traffic police constable was killed by criminal gangs or 'snatchers'. The police arrested about 1050 people in connection with this incident. Among the detainees were seven young children enrolled with Pother Ishkul. They were charged in five separate cases, registered in five different police stations in Dhaka. During the course of the manhunt and in subsequent arrests, iProbono's panel advocates noted errors in the legal process, which included unlawfully detaining the children and misrepresenting them as adults. Our panel advocates succeeded in obtaining an order for the release of the children on bail.

iProbono epitomises a beacon of legal empowerment in Bangladesh."

**Barrister Tapas Kanti Baul,**  
Executive Director, ELCOP

## Advocating for Pro-bono Legal Aid in South Asia

In response to a call for inputs by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, our team drafted recommendations on ways to expand access to justice beyond recourse to legal institutions. Our submission emphasised the role and untapped potential of pro bono legal interventions in closing the gap between rights and access to legal aid and counsel in South Asia.

## Strengthening Civil Society in Bangladesh

Since 2016, we have enhanced the operational capacities of 41 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) through measures like vetting internal policies and providing legal advice on compliance. Our support enables organisations to focus their time and channel their resources towards delivering impactful programmes for vulnerable people.

- » We were invited by DLA Piper, PILnet, and the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law to contribute to the Bangladesh chapter of their global guide on registration formalities for non-profits.
- » We revised the data protection policy of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) to ensure consistent with changes in law and policy.
- » By providing intellectual property advice to the Queer Archives of the Bengal Delta (QABD), we ensured that the acquisition of sensitive case documents was a seamless process.

iProbono ensures dedicated pro bono support throughout the project lifecycle, making a significant impact in the realm of access to justice and strengthening CSOs."

**Barrister Sanwar Hossain,**  
Advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court and Managing Partner,  
S Hossain & Associates



# Queer Archives of the Bengal Delta (QABD)

## Archiving the Experiences of the Bangladeshi Queer Community

iProbono launched the Accelerator programme in 2023 to incubate early-stage social justice ventures driven by purpose and innovative thinking. Our inaugural awardee, the QABD, aims to archive the experiences of the Bangladeshi queer community in both Bangladesh and the United States. It also documents the community's interaction with the criminal justice system in Bangladesh from 1971 to 2023 as means to preserve identity, illuminate systemic failures, and propel reform. Same-sex sexual relations between consenting adults continue to be criminalised under Section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code, punishable by imprisonment. Though rarely enforced, the law is nevertheless used to arrest, intimidate, and silence the community. Deeply regressive views have also resulted in hate crimes, police violence, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination. The QABD is a community-led response to better understand and address these issues.

iProbono's Research and Impact Director, Supriya Roychoudhury, spoke with the co-founders of the QABD, Rasel Ahmed and I Said, to learn about their plans and aspirations for the archive.

**Q. Could you walk us through the motivation for setting up this archive? And what is the change you would like to see it bring into the world?**

**Rasel:** We have been thinking about the value of archiving, the value of preservation, the value of memory, for the last five years or so. This has been an ongoing conversation within the queer community. Our memories are so vulnerable to erasure. When the South Asian American Digital Archive put out a call to set up an oral history project documenting the lives and histories of the South Asian queer community,



we, thought it would be an appropriate anchor for the QABD.

**I Said:** Documenting the oral history of the community is a key element of the QABD, but it does other things as well. We're interested in collecting digital material and creating a repository. Our political analysis work involves writing and publishing articles and commentary linked to the archives. We also want to activate the archive through exhibits, conversations, and webinars. When Rasel and I were in Bangladesh, we noticed that we were deleting our own photographs and texts, basically all sorts of memories. We were deleting ourselves. The question that struck us was: what were we doing about our

self-erasure? This is a very fundamental kind of injustice: that our history is being taken away from us and we are being forced to separate ourselves from our history and memories. Either our stories were being erased or they were being told by others. This was the root of our motivation to set up this archive.

**Rasel:** To add to that, there are so many people who scrutinise us, who want to study us, who make us feel like we are guinea pigs. I am not discouraging researchers, but this kind of disconnected research can result in a further erasure of our memories or a 'crisis of memory', as I Sayed put it. People who are not a part of the community come in to ask about our experiences, they write about them, and then this becomes our 'history'. This is fundamentally wrong.

**Q: Please walk us through your process. How do you go about collating stories from the community? And what are some of the ethical considerations you need to take into account when you assemble a community archive like this?**

**I Sayed:** Whether it is an oral history or a personal collection of digitised items including photographs, and audio, we are working with sensitive material. A personal collection takes about six to eight months to develop. Each memory or record goes through a lot of scrutiny. It takes us several months to develop each of the oral histories. We have multiple meetings with the community and decide what memories will be shared. In terms of access and visibility, we have a slightly nuanced approach. Often, with certain kinds of public archives, everything becomes accessible and transparent for research purposes. We want to complicate the question of access and visibility. We want to ask: what does the person donating to the archive want to make accessible, and to whom? We really want to be thoughtful about what we make public.

archive want to make accessible, and to whom? We really want to be thoughtful about what we make public.

**Q: How is the queer experience complicated by other identity markers such as class, caste, religion, gender or race? How do you plan to explore the issue of intersectionality through your archive?**

**Rasel:** We definitely do not see queer issues as a separate and isolated issue. Everything is interconnected, all of these identities. I am an asylum seeker, I live in the US, and I am a Muslim-born person. We all have these hyphenated identities. It is important we understand the complexities of our intersectionality. Through this archiving work, we are trying to understand and uncover some of these complexities – who we are as migrants, as queer individuals, as Muslims, as refugees, as participants of an exchange programme. How do our different identities interact with each other?

**I Sayed:** We also don't take these intersectional identities to be pre-given. We are engaging in a kind of politics of crafting and finding, reaching new positions and new places. The things that oppress us are sometimes also the things that we are manoeuvring and using to our advantage. What is important is to build solidarity across multiple marginalised communities and groups. There are other archives of queer migrants from other countries and other regions, as well as archives of queer people in the Global North, and as we do this work and build this archive, we are beginning to see resonances and connections. It is our story, yes, but it is also a bigger story.

**Q. We're excited to be working with you on the law project. Could you unpack this for our audience? What other upcoming projects can we look forward to?**

**I Sayed:** The law project is about collecting court cases related to discrimination and violence against the queer community in Bangladesh. To our knowledge, there is currently no such public documentation in Bangladesh. We are also developing a website. As a community archive, this kind of

infrastructure is crucial for us. Another project in the pipeline involves creating a virtual mapping of the physical space where Roopban Magazine was written and published. That space isn't available to us any more, of course, but through this digital space, we want to create a new frontier of access. We have also been thinking about a queer ecology project. Here we are thinking through what riverscapes, plants, parks, water,

air, pets, and wild animals mean for Bangladeshi queers.

**Rasel:** I'm a filmmaker, I Sayed is a poet. We're interested in archiving as an engaged process. This is community-oriented work, and it should be integrated within the community conversation. Since our identities are intersectional and so much of what we do is interconnected, we're very open to working collaboratively.



Image Courtesy QABD/ Illustration by Olokhi Art

## Contributing to the UN Special Rapporteur's Report on Establishing Protection Measures for Victims of Trafficking

Our team met with the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Siobhan Mullally, to discuss our written submission on ways to prevent and address the trafficking of persons in Bangladesh. Several of our recommendations are reflected in the UN Special Rapporteur's report, which was presented before the United Nations General Assembly in April 2023. These included establishing specialised anti-trafficking tribunals, creating a state fund to support victims, providing victims with access to free legal aid, and implementing witness protection measures more effectively.



iProbono's team in Bangladesh presenting our recommendations to the UN Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons



## Enhancing Legal Literacy on Mental Health Rights among Students and Street Children

Street Law is a tool to demystify the law and enhance the legal literacy of people by using participatory methods like role play, games, and theatre. Historically mobilised to amplify rights awareness among the African-American community in the United States, it has since travelled to other parts of the world.

iProbono's 'Street Law' program was very important for street children. Through this campaign, they were able to receive basic knowledge about their mental health. Alongside, the children learned about their legal rights, including child rights, human rights, and child protection. This helped to create social awareness among them."

**Sakir Ibrahim Mati,**  
Founder and Director,  
Pother Ishkul

In Bangladesh, we have been exploring versatile applications of this tool since 2019, when we launched our Street Law program in collaboration with the organisations Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Community Participation and Development (CPD), and Ain-o-Salish Kendra (ASK). We engaged prominent lawyers in Bangladesh to provide legal instruction on child rights and labour law to our target group of 'Street Lawyers' - 12 committed undergraduate students of law. An interactive legal education session delivered by our

'Street Lawyers' allowed 40 child labourers working in automobile shops and petrol pumps across Dhaka to better understand their rights under law. Their employers were similarly trained to ensure workplace safety and accountability in line with Bangladesh's labour laws.

Over the 2022-2023 period, we expanded the programme in collaboration with ELCOP to provide legal education on mental health rights to 360 school children in Dhaka from varied socio-economic backgrounds. This included 30 students from Pother Ishkul, a non-profit school which works closely with vulnerable minors and street children. 90 per cent of the participating students reported that they were likely to apply what they had learnt in the future.



Our Street Lawyers conducting a session on mental health with children from Pother Ishkul

# Nepal

The constitution of Nepal is unique in framing Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR) as fundamental rights for its citizens. However, the ineffective implementation of these laws, combined with poor legal awareness, prevents people from fully accessing their rights. Over the years, iProbono has been working with legal professionals to support the implementation of ESCR through strategic litigation and policy advocacy. In the last five years, we have introduced four Public Interest Litigations (PILs) before the Supreme Court of Nepal to democratise access to ESCR. Among these was a petition filed jointly with LAPSOJ in 2020, seeking the safe return of thousands of Nepali migrant workers stranded overseas during the early months of the pandemic. This petition, together with a similar PIL subsequently filed by the migrant rights organisation, People Forum for Human Rights, prompted a court order that directed the government to bear the costs of rescue and repatriation for certain categories of Nepali migrants stranded overseas.



Two strategic PILs, including one filed by iProbono in collaboration with our Nepal-based partner LAPSOJ during the COVID-19 pandemic, unlocked legal protection for approximately 127,000 stranded Nepali migrants

## Mobilising Youth Fellowships to Advance ESCR

The ESCR Fellowship was created in 2018 as a collaborative initiative between iProbono and the Nepal-based Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice (LAPSOJ) to bridge the gap between law and policy, principle and practice. The aim of this fellowship is to enable early to mid-career lawyers mobilise the power of social impact litigation - in particular, PILs - to accelerate equal access to ESCR. Through consultative workshops convened by iProbono, fellows are provided opportunities to gather feedback on their draft petitions from leading legal experts in Nepal and beyond, allowing them to increase their chances of success in court.

Our 2023 fellows - Ritesh Poudyal, Roshani Giri, and Sajita Ghimire - invited inputs from civil society experts and representatives of the Nepal Bar Association and the Supreme Court of Nepal to strengthen their PIL strategies. These are aimed at strengthening disability rights, correcting gender biases in existing law, and embedding a culture of community paralegals in Nepal. Poudyal's PIL to enable access to public services for people with disabilities was successfully filed before the Supreme Court of Nepal in 2023. Nearly 650,000 people with disabilities in Nepal stand to benefit from the legal protection provided by this PIL.



### Nepal's Law Treats Married Women Differently: Here's How

ESCR Fellow Roshani Giri explains how Nepal is failing to provide married women with the opportunity to exercise their rights.

APR 23



### Institutionalisation of Nepal's Community-Based Paralegals

ESCR Fellow Sajita Ghimire on why paralegals are essential to safeguard access to justice for vulnerable communities in developing nations.

MAY 23

## ESCR Fellowship Five Year Impact

# 15

fellows trained since 2018.

# 75%

of the alumni surveyed are currently engaged in legal work to advance social change. Several hold positions in Nepal's High Courts and Special Courts, or teach in university law departments.

# 88%

of the alumni surveyed reported improved legal research skills as a result of the fellowship.

“iProbono's involvement in implementing Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in Nepal is a much-needed intervention. I am delighted to see how their innovative fellowship and convenings are galvanising a constituency of changemakers dedicated to making these rights a reality for the people of Nepal.”

**Hari Prasad Phuyal, Justice of the Supreme Court of Nepal**

## Advocating for the Right to Food and Shelter

A coalition of sixteen lawyers, including our 2022-23 ESCR fellows, and our fellowship advisor, Raju Chapagai, submitted a letter to the office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation, and the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. The letter urged the government to enforce the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act, as well as the Right to Shelter Act. Though both laws were passed in 2018, several core provisions are yet to translate into implementable regulations.



Local press coverage of iProbono's letter to the government in the Nepali newspaper Kantipur

Below: 2023 ESCR fellows discuss their draft petitions at a consultation organised by iProbono





## Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in Nepal

The 2018 Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act recognises one's fundamental right to safe and affordable abortion services - though under specific circumstances. Nepal's penal code also places restrictions on the legality of abortion, and anyone seeking or providing abortion services outside of the prescribed parameters can be prosecuted. In 2021, iProbono filed a PIL before the Supreme Court of Nepal seeking amendments to existing law which, if considered favourably, has the power to fully decriminalise abortion. A separate PIL filed jointly by the Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD) and the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR) shares our goal. Our petitions, taken together, have the potential to empower roughly 82,00,000 women in Nepal to assert their sexual and reproductive rights.



## Global Partnerships

### Accelerating the global movement for pro bono lawyering

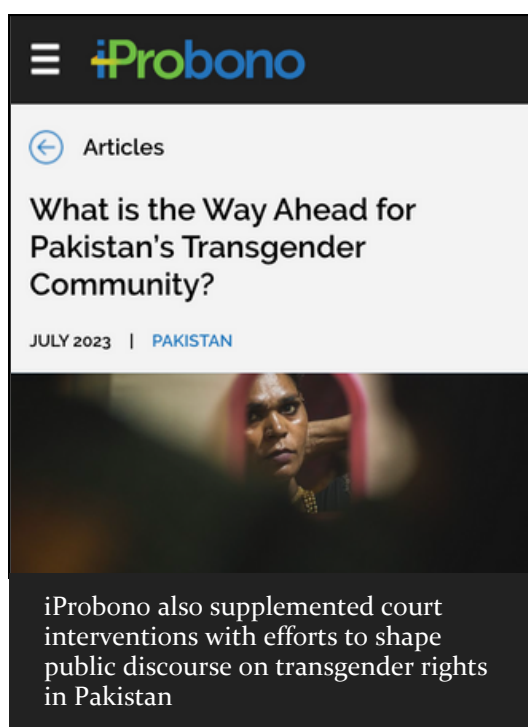
The Asia Pro Bono Consortium (APBC) is a global coalition of lawyers and activists committed to leveraging the power of pro bono lawyering to advance social justice. iProbono has been an active contributor to the consortium's annual and quarterly convenings. In 2023, we shared insights from our two flagship fellowship programmes - the Justice Leila Seth (JLS) Fellowship in India and the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR) Fellowship in Nepal - at the 12th Asia Pro Bono Conference in Cebu, Philippines.

Fellows acknowledged the importance of these initiatives in enriching their skills as public interest lawyers. Speaking about her experiences of working on child protection cases in India, 2023 JLS Fellow Shalanki Prasad said, "Every case is not just a legal challenge - it's a narrative of a child's life. The impact of our work lies in ensuring that the rights of these vulnerable individuals are not just acknowledged, but vigorously asserted and defended". ESCR fellow Sajita Ghimire noted, "I learnt to file a Right to Information request for the first time, which I did in relation to the right to food and housing regulations in Nepal." An audience member observed they felt "inspired to search out and join pro bono fellowship opportunities. I gained knowledge about different models of running fellowships in different contexts."



# Pakistan

In 2018, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed in Pakistan after years of focused activism. It rested on a declaration by the Islamic Ideology Council (IIC) – whose support is required for the enactment of legislation – that the law was indeed compatible with Islamic principles and practices. In 2023, the IIC altered its position, succumbing to mounting pressure from religious party representatives and right-wing politicians. It recommended extending legal protection exclusively to intersex communities and not to those who did not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. The Federal Shariat Court went on to strike down three critical sections of law. These were in relation to the definition of gender identity, the right to alter one's gender identity on official documentation, and the right to inheritance. iProbono supported grassroots initiatives advocating to retain these sections. Our partner organisation, Wajood Society, engaged a religious scholar to present evidence of the law's compatibility with Islam in the Federal Shariat Court.



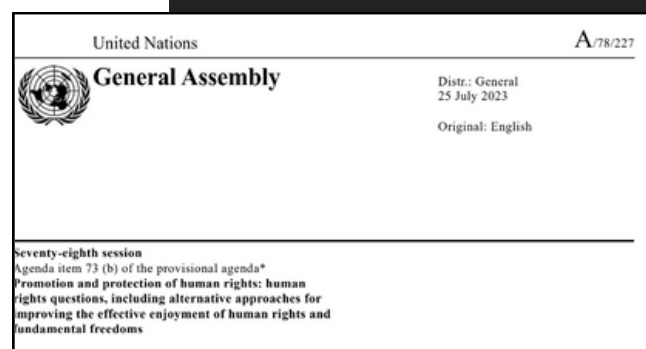
Recognising the power of global institutions, iProbono made a written submission to the UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI), Victor Madrigal-Borloz. We highlighted how present day SOGI laws and policies in Pakistan continue to be inflected by their colonial provenance. Our policy recommendations included encouraging the integration of LGBT+ people into public life in Pakistan, enacting legislation to protect their rights, sensitising government stakeholders, and providing monetary support and reparations on a case-by-case basis.



## Sexuality & Gender in Pakistan: The Impact of Colonialism

iProbono's submission to the United Nations Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

iProbono's contribution was cited in the final report presented at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in November 2023

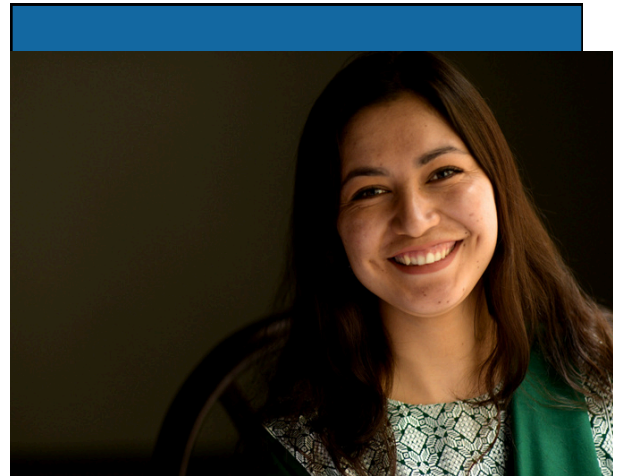


# Global Partnerships

## Building global awareness on resettlement challenges of Afghan refugees

According to the UNHCR, 1.6 million Afghans were forced to flee their homes after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in 2021. iProbono acted swiftly in response to a request from local partners to support evacuations of vulnerable Afghan nationals. Under our 'People at Risk' program, we relocated 126 people to various countries. This included a group of around 80 Afghan nationals, composed mainly of female national and provincial level cyclists and their family members. Our team facilitated their exit from Afghanistan, accommodated them in safehouses in Pakistan, arranged for counselling services, and prepared them for their onward journey to Italy where they were to be resettled via a humanitarian corridor established by the Italian government.

In 2023, our CEO Mariam Faruqi travelled to Italy with photojournalist Mobeen Ansari to meet with the women cyclists and evaluate how iProbono could continue to support them. The stories they shared revealed a mixed reality. Although some cyclists had successfully enrolled in educational courses, they struggled with proficiency in Italian, and were working long hours at poorly paid jobs. Many were suffering from depression. Others remained broadly optimistic about the future even though they had yet to gain admission in university. Nearly everyone in the group tenaciously held on to hopes of reuniting with loved ones left behind in Afghanistan. Cycling in their new home country offered an emotional lifeline.

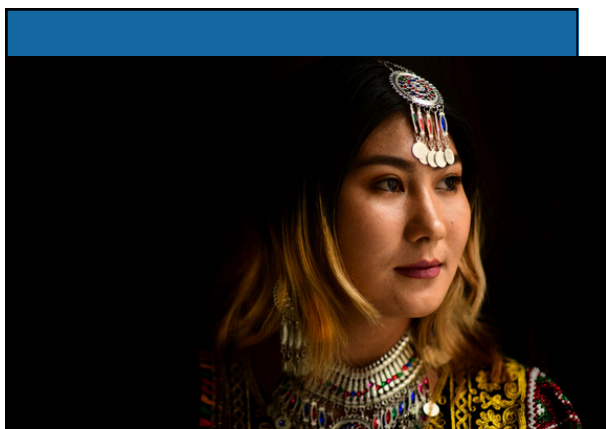


"I have lots of dreams that hopefully will come true. My first priority is to find scholarships as I cannot afford the tuition for a university course. Applying is a bit challenging for me, but I want to continue my education. I am never going to stop learning. It's obvious that the world of technology and AI is making changes in the world. I want to be one of the women who use science to change the world. I would also love to represent Afghan women in the world."

**Habiba lives in Rome, where she is learning Italian and finding ways to gain admission in university.**



Photos credit: Mobeen Ansari



“When the Taliban arrived, my sister and brother and I were forced to migrate to Iran. I was in Iran for six months, which were very difficult. Finally, I had to come back to Kabul and then I went to Pakistan.” notes Zuleikha, now living in a small town in central Italy. “Kabul was like a paradise to me. I was very happy there, I was at peace.

Zuleikha is keen to continue her studies and enrol in a university as soon as possible.

I want to study business and would like to become a successful businesswoman and an entrepreneur. I also want to continue cycling and become a champion for Afghan women across the world.”



Photos credit: Mobeen Ansari

As a photojournalist, I have often worked on stories covering vulnerable communities and people at risk. iProbono puts a lot of heart into uplifting people in need of support, helping them explore their full potential. The organisation goes beyond providing support, keeping in touch with the communities they work with. I've had the privilege of photographing the evacuated Afghan cyclists, who have witnessed a remarkable transformation as they settle into their new lives in Italy.”

**Mobeen Ansari, photojournalist**

The ability to bring international connectivity alongside localised legal expertise is key to iProbono's effectiveness. The successful resettlement of Afghan refugees, who were fleeing the Taliban, from Pakistan to Europe is a recent example of the edge iProbono brings to the table.”

**Ali Dayan Hasan,  
Human Rights and Capacity  
Development Expert**

iProbono shared their stories and challenges with a community of 200 lawyers and activists at PILnet's annual convening in October 2023, bridging the gap between the legal needs of Afghans and global pro bono resources and services.





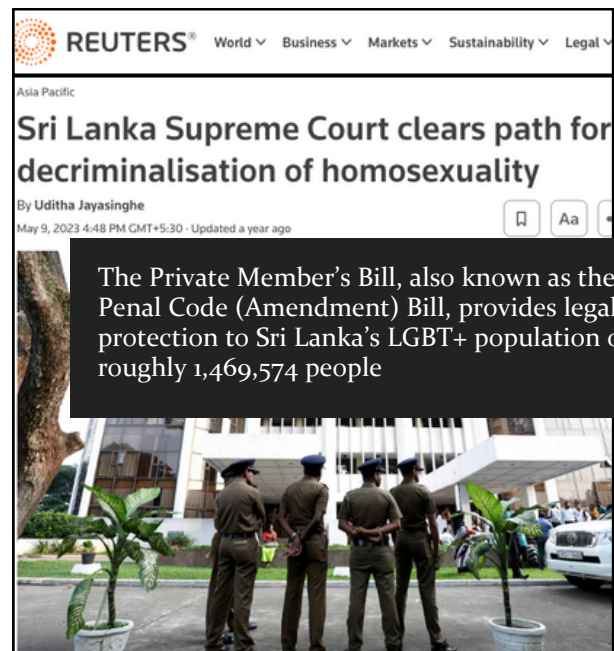
# Sri Lanka

Sections 365 and 365A of the Sri Lankan Penal Code prohibit unnatural offences and acts of gross indecency between people and these provisions are often used to criminalise same-sex relations between consenting adults. In some cases, they are also invoked to arrest LGBT+ people who have not engaged in sexual acts. Since 2018, iProbono's Equality Law Programme has been working to protect the rights of the LGBT+ community in Sri Lanka. In 2023, we built on previous programme milestones, which included securing a precedent-setting order from the Magistrate's Court recognising that homosexuality is not a mental illness, and a first-of-its-kind apology by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) for historic acts of violence committed by the police against the LGBT+ community.

## Safeguarding the Rights of the LGBT+ Community

In 2023, iProbono contributed to the draft text of a Private Member's Bill presented by Member of Parliament Premnath Dolawatte to decriminalise homosexuality. Two months after the Bill was gazetted, critics submitted a petition before the Supreme Court declaring it to be unconstitutional. iProbono's Equality Law Director Aritha Wickramasinghe was one of 20 eminent activists and human rights lawyers who submitted intervening petitions in support of the Bill. Other petitioners included former Human Rights Commissioner Ambika Satkunanathan, former Undersecretary for Children Radhika Coomaraswamy, Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo Professor Savithri Gunasekara, and former Human Rights Commissioner Ramani Muttetuwegama. These petitioners argued against critics' allegations that the decriminalisation of

LGBT+ relations would result in the abuse of children, increase the risk of HIV, and heighten threats to national security. In a historic decision in May 2023, the Supreme Court held that the Bill was not inconsistent with the constitution as it affirmed equal protection before the law.



There is a common thread that runs through most of the arguments put forward by and in support of the Petitioners, which is that they are largely based on speculation and are tenuous at best, and may be disposed of summarily. For instance, the argument that children would be harmed by the passing of this Bill or the argument that there shall be an increase in the number of those afflicted by HIV and AIDS is specious."

**Supreme Court order, SC SD No. 13/2023 decided on 9 May 2023**



## Shaping the National Debate on LGBT+ Equality

Spurring the petition against the Private Members' Bill were a number of false narratives. Our online national campaign, 'Demystifying Decriminalisation', was designed to counter the misinformation at the heart of these narratives. Launched during Pride Month, the campaign featured a Twitter Spaces series in which eminent human rights and LGBT+ experts, including iProbono's Aritha Wickramasinghe, former Human Rights Commissioner Ambika Satkunanathan, Attorney-at-Law Radhika Gunaratne, and Dr Tush Wickramanayaka, Founder Chairperson of Stop Child Cruelty Trust and Co-convener of Child Protection Alliance, refuted commonly held myths using empirical evidence and facts. Each episode included a bilingual (English and Sinhala) Q&A session to encourage public participation in the conversation. We concluded the campaign with an offline panel discussion in partnership with the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology to sensitise law students to the social and legal challenges faced by LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka.

Through our partnership with iProbono, we are supporting over ten children involved in the biggest child sexual abuse case in a state institution, offering justice to young survivors of unimaginable trauma. iProbono's support has not only helped individual cases but has also contributed to broader awareness and advocacy for the protection of the rights of children in Sri Lanka."

**Dr Tush Wickramanayaka.**  
Founder Chairperson, Stop Child Cruelty Trust and Co-convener, Child Protection Alliance

## Stigma-Pulse Series

We recognise that amplifying the stories of those who suffer discrimination is an important step towards their empowerment. In 2022, iProbono collaborated with the online media platform, Pulse, to launch a talk show featuring the stories and perspectives of Sri Lanka's underrepresented communities. In its pilot five-episode season, 'Stigma' reached an audience of over 1.9 million viewers across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Returning in 2023 for a second season of eight episodes, 'Stigma' illuminated diverse personal stories - from a survivor's recollection of deep societal and state neglect after being sexually abused as a child, to a woman's examination of her fraught experiences with an unsafe abortion.



[Top] iProbono Equality Director, Aritha Wickramasinghe in conversation with Krishni Iresha about the normalisation of sexual harassment in public spaces

[Right] Season 2 of Stigma reached over one million people

The women who come on this programme and discuss subjects that generally people want to sweep under the carpet, so to speak, are very courageous!"

**Viewer comment**

## Catalysing Accountability in the Justice Ecosystem

Last year's apology by the Inspector General of Police set the scene for deepening the collaboration between the police and Sri Lanka's LGBT+ community. We expanded the remit of our Access to Justice programme to include sensitising police officers to best practices and protocols when dealing with LGBT+ people, children, and women. Supported by the US Embassy in Sri Lanka and the civil society organisation Sri Lanka Unites, our programme brought together 37 lawyers, police officers, and activists in a three-day workshop facilitated by iProbono and partners. Modules were designed to deepen knowledge about existing laws and their relevance to diverse scenarios, and address prejudices against the LGBT+ community. We also collaborated with partners to develop emergency toolkits containing information on statutory provisions, international obligations, case laws, and best practices. These have been produced in English, Sinhala and Tamil, for use by lawyers and police officers.

Given that I am a beginner level police officer, I understand that the future of the country depends on officers like me. A training programme such as this could be developed into a 'training school' to educate and train police officers, especially junior officers, on social issues and needs."

**A participating police officer,  
Access to Justice Programme**

- » A 100% shift in attitude among police officers in attendance who did not previously recognise domestic violence as a punishable offence;
- » 69% of the lawyers in attendance demonstrated an increase in legal knowledge of child sexual abuse protocols.



Stakeholders working together at an interactive session during our three-day event

I must commend iProbono for its groundbreaking initiative, the Access to Justice Programme, which has brought together police, lawyers, and activists in a collaborative effort to advance the cause of justice which may be the first of its kind. This innovative approach is transforming the landscape of legal advocacy and support, creating real, positive change in Sri Lanka. I must also applaud their efforts in supporting the drafting of key legislative reforms that will further enhance the SGBV landscape."

**Jerusha Crossette-Thambiah,  
Attorney At Law, iProbono Panel  
Advocate, Sri Lanka**

# Acknowledgements

Thanks to our community for their generous support in enabling us to advance access to justice for all.

Our partners include:



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