

Designing the Law in Nepal: An Experiment in Legal Awareness

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WHEN RIGHTS ARE AT RISK, preventive action is critical. Legal awareness bridges this gap between vulnerability and justice. To illustrate what the law can tangibly do to change a life, iProbono works with allies, partners, and members of impacted communities to develop practical resources that translate legal knowledge into actionable guidance.

iProbono first travelled to Nepal in 2018, only a few years after the country's new Constitution came into force in 2015. One of our interventions, a successful collaboration between practice and academia across borders, has taken the shape of "legal design," or the creative use of communications to promote knowledge of the law, to advance a woman's right to abortion.

Professor of Legal Education and Director of Legal Design at City University, Emily Allbon, has explained that

Working within legal design is always rewarding. Like teaching, the best bit is arguably when you get to see that final flash of understanding after you've made a challenging or difficult concept become clear, and the individual can see a way forward to answer a question, to reason something out or to take a specific action.

This article charts the rewarding impact of an experiment in legal design.

Nepal Legal Context

Nepal's Constitution guarantees women the right to safe motherhood and reproductive health, which includes autonomy over one's decision to have children and the right to terminate the pregnancy. But laws outlined under the National Penal Code (2017) and the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act (2018) allow women abortions only under specific sce-

narios, leaving them unprotected and vulnerable to prosecution where terminations are sought beyond the parameters permitted. Many women, especially those who are poorer and historically more marginalized, are forced to undergo illegal and unsafe abortions which carry longer-term health risks and can even result in death. Without fully decriminalizing abortion, these risks and dangers will only persist and deepen.

Legal Design Toolkit

In 2021, iProbono filed Public Interest Litigation before the constitutional bench of the Supreme Court highlighting that even partial decriminalization of abortion, as it currently exists within Nepal's legal framework, violates a suite of fundamental rights enshrined under Nepal's Constitution. These include the right to live with dignity, the right to equality, and the right to safe motherhood and reproductive health.

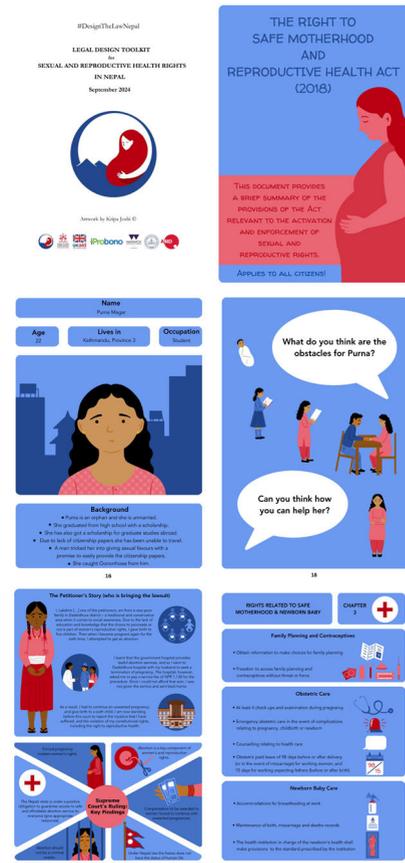


Mara Malagodi and Sabrina Germain at the Legal Design Workshop in Kathmandu, April 2024.

This petition is the culmination of groundwork carefully established in previous years by iProbono and its partners. Our team realized early on in the litigation journey that additional strategies were required to raise awareness around this issue. Dr Mara Malagodi, Associate Professor at Warwick University and a member of iProbono’s Global Advisory Committee was already using varied legal education tools to enhance our litigation strategy. By introducing a collaboration with Emily Allbon and Sabrina Germain from City University, the team was able to deliver a series of professional development workshops for Nepali lawyers, civil society activists, and academics

committed to fully decriminalizing abortion in Nepal. The idea to develop a “legal design toolkit” was seeded in one such workshop as a way to raise legal awareness, spotlight the Public Interest Litigation and re-ignite public debate on the need for urgent legal reform.

A legal design approach can work at many levels and for varied audiences. It can replace complex legal jargon with interactive features such as storytelling and visual illustrations. It can also deploy information design fundamentals about how information is processed and formatted. An example cited by our team is in contract law and using a human-centred approach to make legal agreements and contracts more accessible. Dr Malagodi and her team worked with well-known Nepali illustrator, Kripa Joshi to create compelling creatives and design to illustrate the toolkit. Each image, simple yet compelling expresses ideas from



Illustrations from the Legal Design Toolkit, created by Kripa Joshi.

the persona of a client to explaining medical terminology using graphic illustrations of the reproductive system.

Our team has considered how effective visual design can ensure users understand what they are agreeing to. Innovative examples of legal design include Robert de Rooy's contracts for fruit pickers and Camilla Andersen's employment contract for the global infrastructure company Aurecon. These "comic contracts" are legally binding and offer a way to improve the transparency of legal documents, reduce confusion, and empower individuals to make informed decisions. The WorldCC Contract Design Pattern Library⁴ also shares examples of design techniques which can be utilized for contracts.

With additional support from local partners, including the Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice (LAPSO) our team developed a first-of-its-kind toolkit which brings together Kripa's illustrated descriptions of important and relevant judgments pertaining to abortion rights and an explainer for the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act 2018, and "journey maps" - or fictionalized stories inspired by the real-life experiences of Nepali women who have sought abortions in the past - to highlight the particular barriers faced by women suffering from intersectional discrimination. We also developed a "how to" written manual and video explainer as accompanying resources to guide the toolkit's intended users - lawyers, civil society activists, doctors, and nurses - on how to mobilize the toolkit when interfacing with women approaching them for abortion-related services or counsel.

The Toolkit was launched in Nepali and English in 2024 to lawyers, activists, former members of the judiciary, journalists and doctors. Its potential to shift institutional mindsets on reproductive rights was acknowledged by senior members of Nepal's judiciary. Kalyan Shrestha, former Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Nepal, noted:

The toolkit can serve as an invaluable resource for service providers, such as doctors, nurses, and health workers, as well as for the general public. It is my hope that this toolkit will be fully utilized and that its reach will continue to expand.

Hon. Justice Hari Prasad Phuyal of the Supreme Court of Nepal similarly noted that the "toolkit is a promising step toward ensuring that stake-

holders are well-versed in the law and that international and national commitments are upheld.”



Prem Chandra Rai (Executive Director, Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice – LAPSOJ), Mariam Faruqi (CEO, iProbono), Dr. Mara Malagodi (Warwick Law School), Hon’ble Kalyan Shrestha (Former Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Nepal), and Hon’ble Justice Hari Phuyal (Justice, Supreme Court of Nepal) launch the toolkit.

The launch was accompanied by practical workshops involving lively simulations and role-plays to demonstrate its usability among lawyers, activists, and medical professionals. Feedback data from these workshops showed that 90 percent of the participating lawyers surveyed gained valuable insights from the toolkit and recognized its potential to strengthen their casework.

Toolkit Ambassadors

Partner feedback to disperse the toolkit beyond those present in the room resulted in our “toolkit ambassadors” intervention. Using a dynamic “training of trainers” model, our team equipped five “toolkit ambassadors” from civil society, public health, and the legal domain to integrate the toolkit into their professional practice and pass this knowledge on to their peers based in more remote regions of Nepal.

Capacity-building sessions conducted by our team for five “toolkit ambassadors” snowballed into toolkit knowledge and access for an additional one hundred lawyers, healthcare professionals, and civil society representatives across Nepal. Conducted over a period of just four months, feedback data from participants attending the ambassador-led trainings showed notable improvements in legal knowledge. 83 percent of civil society participants of one such training, many of whom had no prior sexual and reproductive health rights education, reported moderate to high understanding of abortion laws afterwards. Health professionals accurately identified essential legal grounds for abortion, a remarkable achievement given that 64 percent had not received such training in medical school. We received numerous requests for additional training sessions from participants, including those from more diverse backgrounds, like the *Kamlari* Group, an ethnic community of women who were previously subjected to bonded labor, as well as non-binary people.

Toolkit Dissemination

The toolkit has until September 2025 reached more than four hundred stakeholders across Nepal through workshops, trainings, consultations, meetings, and direct downloads from iProbono’s website. Early examples attest to how diverse actors, within just a few months of exposure to the toolkit, have already begun to actively embed it into their professional practices. One lawyer, for instance, told us that they used the toolkit to develop an audio-visual explainer about relevant abortion laws which in turn sparked a wider conversation on social media. In another example, a youth-led sexual and reproductive health rights advocacy group used the toolkit as part of their legal empowerment trainings for young adults. We expect to see more such examples of toolkit ownership and usage in the coming months. Importantly, the toolkit is a living resource, and we continue to seek feedback to ensure that it remains adaptable and context-appropriate at all times.

Collaboration has been the cornerstone of the toolkit’s success. It deepened interdisciplinary collaboration by bringing together perspectives from law, healthcare, design, and applied research, offering an innovative and effective pathway to advance reproductive justice. By bringing together varied expertise and skillsets from different countries - Nepal, UK and India - the

project also deepened innovative South to South, South to North, and North to South exchanges of knowledge and learning. It was also heavily contingent on collaboration with local partners. We interviewed stakeholders to collect valuable baseline data and invited feedback and input into various iterations of the toolkit (and accompanying resources) to ensure participation and local ownership.

Feedback data collected by us revealed strong stakeholder interest in formally integrating the toolkit into law curricula, medical school trainings, and secondary education. During our evaluation, both legal practitioners and medical professionals emphasized critical gaps between theory and practice, highlighting the toolkit's potential to spark empathetic engagement and nuanced legal understanding of sexual and reproductive health rights, prevent medical negligence by adopting a rights-based approach, and embed the principle of non-discrimination. It is also seen as a potentially critical lever for promoting awareness about sexual and reproductive health rights among younger audiences, such as students at the primary and secondary level, by converting the toolkit into child-friendly handouts.

Concluding Remarks

iProbono's experiment with legal design to develop legal awareness in Nepal is a work in progress and an example of how we can adapt to shifting socio-political realities in the countries where we work. This project also shows that justice is collaborative and pragmatic. iProbono's vision is a world where justice is inclusive, and where justice actors working in increasingly complex environments have the support they need. We realize our mission and vision by representing people in need before courts and tribunals, strengthening the power of civil society, and advocating for policies that advance equality and end discrimination. With a global footprint and deep expertise across South Asia and its diaspora, we are committed to making justice accessible to all. As structural inequities grow and fundamental rights are increasingly contested, we continue to adapt – guided by the conviction that a just society is not an abstraction, but the result of strategic interventions, grassroots empowerment, systemic reform, and sustained effort.

Endnote

- 1 Contract Design Pattern Library, <https://contract-design.worldcc.foundation>.