THEMATIC ADVOCACY BRIEF

Protecting the rights of stateless persons

Executive Summary

Millions of stateless persons around the world face barriers to accessing fundamental rights and basic services. Without a nationality, many struggle to obtain identity documents, access education, healthcare, employment, housing, social protection, and freedom of movement. Stateless persons are often exposed to poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, arbitrary detention, trafficking, and exploitation. In many situations, lack of nationality leaves them without effective protection and unable to fully participate in society

Protecting the rights of stateless persons is both a human rights imperative and a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable development. States have a responsibility to ensure that stateless persons enjoy their fundamental rights without discrimination, regardless of their nationality status. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving access to rights and services, and promoting inclusion can help stateless persons live with dignity and contribute to societies overall, as well as providing stateless persons with a chance to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Background

At the end of 2025, UNHCR statistical reporting included 4.5 million stateless persons and persons with undetermined nationality across 100 countries, although the actual global figure is expected to be significantly higher. Stateless persons often face barriers in accessing fundamental rights and services that many people take for granted. Without proof of legal identity or recognized legal status, they are unable to enroll in school, access healthcare, obtain lawful employment, open bank accounts, own property, register life events, or benefit from social protection systems.

4.5M+

Stateless & undetermined nationality:
UNHCR year-end 2025 statistics across 100 countries, actual global figures are significantly higher.

Stateless persons face significant barriers in accessing their fundamental rights and basic services because they lack the legal bond of nationality through which States typically recognize and guarantee rights. Without proof of nationality or legal identity, they may encounter difficulties obtaining identity documents, accessing education, healthcare, social protection, employment, housing and freedom of movement. These challenges are often compounded by discrimination, administrative barriers, and limited awareness among authorities and service providers, resulting in social exclusion, insecurity, and marginalization.

Global Alliance to End Statelessness

Co-funded by the European Union

In both migratory and non-migratory contexts, stateless persons may face difficulties securing a legal status and accessing protection due to the absence of dedicated procedures to identify and recognize stateless persons in many countries. In migratory context, these challenges are often exacerbated, as stateless persons may be unable to regularize their stay or access appropriate protection mechanisms. Women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and minority communities may experience compounded vulnerabilities. Without targeted measures to identify, protect, and facilitate the naturalization of stateless persons, many remain trapped in situations of exclusion that can persist across generations.

Who Is Affected

Statelessness affects people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Stateless persons may belong to minority groups, indigenous communities, migrant populations, displaced populations, or communities affected by historical discrimination, conflict, state succession, or gaps in nationality laws. Many have lived for generations in the countries they call home yet remain excluded from legal recognition and access to rights.

Women and girls may face particular barriers where discriminatory laws or practices limit their ability to access documentation, services, or protection. Children who are stateless often encounter obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, birth registration, and other essential services, with lifelong consequences for their development and well-being. Older persons, persons with disabilities, and those living in poverty may face additional challenges in accessing support and protection.

Stateless persons in migratory context are often especially vulnerable due to difficulties obtaining identity documents, access to rights and justice. In all these situations, the denial of rights not only affects individuals but also undermines social cohesion, inclusion, and sustainable development for entire communities.

"The denial of rights undermines social cohesion and inclusion."

Legal & Policy Framework

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 [Articles 1, 2, 6, 7, 15, 22 and 25]
- Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, 1954
- Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, 1961
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979
- Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006
- Sustainable Development Goals, 2015
- The Global Compact on Refugees, 2018
- The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, 2018
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, 1990

Policy & Legal Reform Recommendations

- Accede to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons
- Establish or strengthen statelessness determination procedures to identify and protect stateless persons in a migratory context.
- Align national legislation and policies with the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and relevant international standards.
- Ensure stateless persons have access to identity documents and legal status regardless of their nationality status.
- Guarantee equal access to stateless persons to education, healthcare, employment, housing, social protection, and financial services.
- Prevent arbitrary detention of stateless persons.
- Ensure that stateless people have a seat at the table in discussions on decisions that could have an impact on their lives.
- Include stateless persons in national development plans and social inclusion initiatives.
- Strengthen data collection and analysis to better understand and respond to situations of statelessness.
- Promote partnerships among governments, UN agencies, development actors, civil society organizations, and stateless-led organizations, including in the framework of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness.
- Raise awareness among stateless persons regarding their rights.
- Ensure that policies and programmes are inclusive and leave no one behind.

850M

Individuals worldwide living without proof of legal identity (World Bank, 2025).

Advocacy messaging

- “No one should be denied their rights because they lack a nationality.”
- “Protection and inclusion of stateless persons benefits individuals, communities, and societies.”
- “Access to documentation, services, and legal protection is essential for dignity of stateless persons.”
- “The only solution to statelessness is nationality which ensures access to fundamental rights and basic services.”

Call to Action

States should urgently act to ensure that:

- Stateless persons can access their fundamental rights without discrimination and regardless of their status.
- National laws, policies, and practices provide effective protection and inclusion for stateless persons.
- Statelessness determination procedures are established and strengthened to address the situation of stateless persons in migratory context.
- Stateless persons are included in national systems, development planning, and service delivery.
- No one is left behind because they lack a nationality, and every person can live in dignity, security, and equality.

"A nationality opens doors to education, healthcare, and dignity statelessness closes them."

