



Leaving No Child Behind:

**childhood statelessness
and the fight for inclusive education**





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Fragmented journey

Twenty-four-year-old Nosizi Dube is from the Shona community,¹ a formerly stateless minority group in Kenya. In 2024, she made history as the first Shona woman to complete university studies in Kenya. For Nosizi, completing university was beyond her “wildest dreams” and marked the culmination of a journey that “was nothing short of a miracle”.²

Nosizi’s road to success was paved with uncertainty, but each hurdle built her resilience. Born into an unrecognized ethnic minority that was denied Kenyan citizenship, Nosizi was also denied one of the basic documents required to ensure the enjoyment of her rights: a birth certificate.

As she approached the end of primary school, her lack of nationality threatened to destabilize her dreams of pursuing higher education – a realization that first emerged when she was asked to produce her birth certificate to sit primary school exams. Fortunately for Nosizi, a nationwide relaxation of registration requirements for all children in Kenya eventually allowed her to register for her exams, but this setback was only the first in a series of obstacles she would be forced to navigate over the course of her tender childhood years.

During high school, Nosizi constantly faced adversity and uncertainty around her education. Although she was a high performing student, her lack of identity documents prevented her from applying for Government bursaries or grants, placing an additional financial burden on her already struggling family. Without a passport, she was forced to turn down rare and valuable opportunities such as a student exchange in the United States. Yet, despite the odds, Nosizi persevered.

Her exceptional academic performance allowed her to obtain private sponsorship to complete her high school studies, but issues around her lack of citizenship re-emerged when it was time to sit high school exams, and then again when she applied for university. Although Nosizi was initially accepted to university, as a stateless person she was unable to register. Fortunately, this stage of her own personal journey coincided

with a period of national dialogue and political momentum to address statelessness in Kenya. Nosizi’s story became emblematic of the challenges faced by stateless Shona and with the support of local human rights actors, Nosizi was admitted to university and eventually granted Kenyan citizenship.

“Being stateless is like you don’t exist. You look like everyone else, but because you have no identification documents you live in the shadows, unable to do basic things like go to school or even get a mobile phone number. Getting recognition as a Kenyan citizen has given me visibility and rights just like everyone else. I feel like I am free, like the chains of statelessness have been broken”³

Nosizi’s story is one of fortuitous success. Exceptionally, she was able to navigate and eventually overcome the adverse environment to which she was exposed, but for most stateless children – the reality and outcomes are far less favorable.



Executive summary

Childhood statelessness is a global challenge, impacting millions of children worldwide, in direct violation of the right of every child to a nationality. This phenomenon results from discrimination, inadequate birth registration, conflicting nationality laws, the absence of safeguards to prevent statelessness, and, most notably, the cycle of intergenerational statelessness.

Lack of nationality has profound consequences on a child's ability to access fundamental human rights, including education and healthcare. In particular, barriers to education severely hinder a child's development, limiting their chances of breaking free from poverty and exclusion and contributing meaningfully to their community.

International law guarantees every child the right to education, regardless of nationality or statelessness, and there is a global consensus that no child must be left behind. However, domestic laws and policies continue to obstruct access to education for stateless children – either directly through explicit rules that exclude non-citizen children, or indirectly through barriers that (intentionally) fail to account for the circumstances of a child's statelessness. Far too often, this leaves stateless children uneducated or undereducated, leading to discouragement, low self esteem and decreased opportunities for their future.

This report focuses on the unique obstacles that prevent stateless children from accessing regular, consistent education. By consulting with community groups that work directly with stateless children, we learned more about the complexity of the issue, as well as the strategies needed to address it. The efforts to close the education gap for stateless children require stronger international support and solidarity, to amplify the lessons learned and ensure they reach the right platforms. The report offers an insight into how joint action on this issue could be shaped, discussing the design and delivery of a coordinated *Awareness Month on Childhood Statelessness and the Right to Education*. Key learnings that emerged from this initiative include:

- The importance of consultation and collaboration with the community as essential pillars for effective action.
- That it is possible to 'demystify' nationality and statelessness for different audiences, including children and youths.
- That it is possible to 'de-politicize' statelessness and engage in constructive dialogue with states.
- That until education is truly universal, alternative education projects are critical for stateless children, but need more support.
- That the unique needs of stateless children must be met if we truly want to ensure no child is left behind.

Our collaborative work on childhood statelessness and education provided invaluable insights into the complex and multifaceted educational challenges facing stateless children worldwide – but there is still more work to be done. We invite you to support this cause and help ensure stateless children are not left behind. Our Open Letter on Inclusive Education for Stateless Children, which has already gathered over 850 signatures remains open for additional endorsements.



Introduction

Around the world, tens of thousands of children are unable to attend school or are forced to abruptly abandon their studies, because they lack nationality,⁴ legal identity,⁵ or both. Stateless children often face significant barriers to enrolling in formal education systems and the likelihood of these children completing their studies or doing so without significant disruption is slim.⁶

Over the course of 2023 and 2024, the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion⁷ led a collaborative effort to gain insight into the specific barriers that prevent or impede access to education for stateless children in different countries around the world. This report draws on those activities, which included extensive desk research on the issue and consultations with organizations working directly with impacted communities,⁸ as well as with key stakeholders in the education and child rights sector.⁹ The report further incorporates insights gained through the design and delivery of a month-long awareness raising campaign, dedicated to Childhood Statelessness and Education, undertaken jointly with grassroots organizations that share a common interest in promoting inclusive education for stateless children.

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees every child's right to a nationality and requires states to take measures to avoid cases of childhood statelessness.

Statelessness occurs when a person is “not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law”. It affects millions of children around the world.

Nationality often operates as a legal or practical gateway to the enjoyment of other rights. When a child lacks a nationality, this creates a situation of severe disadvantage, vulnerability and marginalisation. Many stateless children also have not had their births registered and cannot access identity documentation. This further undermines the child's access to other rights.

For more: [Children | Stateless Hub](#)

This report spotlights the range of challenges and obstacles faced by stateless children in pursuit of education. It underscores the pressing need for a fresh and intentional approach to overcome these challenges, if we are to ensure that no child is left behind. It exposes the abandoned hopes and dreams lost because of lack of nationality, but also the resilience and determination that has helped some stateless children to overcome these obstacles. Finally, this report aims to inspire and motivate action by stakeholders working to achieve equitable access to education for all children. This includes states with international obligations to ensure universal education, as well as international agencies and other actors mandated to support the education of all children.

Setting out the problem: education is a right for all children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes education as a right of every child, on the basis of equal opportunity.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which has oversight of the Convention, has affirmed that the rights enshrined in the Convention (including the right to education) apply to **all** children without discrimination.¹⁰ States are obliged to implement the provisions on an equal basis in accordance with the principle of the best interest of the child:¹¹

“The enjoyment of rights stipulated in the Convention are not limited to children who are citizens of a State party and must therefore, if not explicitly stated otherwise in the Convention also be available to all children – including asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children, irrespective of their nationality, immigration status or statelessness.”¹²

Several other international¹³ and regional human rights¹⁴ instruments protect the child’s right to education for all children, such as the International Covenant on Economic,

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees free compulsory primary **education for all children** and guides that free secondary education that should be available and accessible to all. The provision further prescribes that every State should make higher education accessible based on its capacity.

Social and Cultural Rights. The 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons also specifically affirms the right to education for stateless children.¹⁵

These provisions are binding under international law and are complemented by several international declarations, frameworks and global initiatives that further underscore the need for inclusive, equitable quality education for all children.¹⁶ Chief amongst these is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 4.

SDG 4 on Quality Education calls on States to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities **for all**.

Despite these provisions and initiatives aimed at guaranteeing access to education for all children without discrimination, stateless children face disproportionate challenges to register for school and to attend on a continuous basis. In fact, the educational barriers faced by stateless children often arise by design, as a product of the same structural exclusion that also obstructs enjoyment of the right to a nationality.

From the consultation with civil society actors working with stateless communities, **two distinct types of discrimination** emerged as principle underlying causes that inhibit free access to education for stateless children:

1. Direct discrimination, whereby discriminatory laws, policies and directives explicitly reserve public education for citizens only. This approach essentially excludes any person who is not a citizen – affecting all non-citizens and stateless persons alike.

CASE STUDY - MALAYSIA

On the island of Omdal on Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, stateless children from the Bajau Laut community struggle to gain access to classrooms. Despite being the indigenous people of the Sulu and Sulawesi Sea, many Bajau Laut are born stateless. As non-nationals, they are excluded from accessing public education because Malaysian law reserves the right to public education exclusively for citizens. This position effectively blocks access to education for stateless children. Although a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Malaysia has entered several reservations to key articles in the Convention, including freedom from discrimination, the right to nationality and the right to education. Malaysia’s position creates significant challenges for stateless communities belonging to indigenous minorities such as the Bajau Laut, but the government has repeatedly ignored calls from human rights bodies and advocates to remove reservations to these provisions and ensure equal access to education for all children including non-nationals.

ISKUL SAMA DILAUT OMADAL (Iskul)

Iskul was established in 2015 to provide holistic education to the stateless children on Omdal Island, starting with a foundation of basic literacy skills. Their vision is to build young leaders among the stateless and local community empowering them to become changemakers who address challenges within their own communities. In addition to education, ISKUL provides meals to support the students nutritional intake, started a Community Health Centre, and piloted a waste management system in Omdal for both stateless and Malaysian communities alongside other environmental initiatives.

Language has long been a barrier between the Bajau Laut community and government agencies. Now, thanks to dedicated efforts, ISKUL students and assistant teachers like Mutasli and Bilkuin have become interpreters, bridging the gap. During Suhakam's (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia) July 2024 visit to Semporna, they played a crucial role as guides and translators. This experience has empowered them to take an active role in facilitating communication, which is essential for engaging with local authorities and building stronger ties with the broader community.

2. Indirect discrimination, whereby domestic laws, policies and practices have a discriminatory effect on stateless children, due to their inability to meet basic registration or school entry requirements. This arises, for instance, when children do not have a birth certificate or identification document and no accommodation is made for them to access schooling through adapted requirements¹⁷.

CASE STUDY - PAKISTAN

Machar Colony is one of the largest informal settlements in Karachi, Pakistan, home to over 800,000 people, more than half of whom are stateless, undocumented, or struggling with issues of citizenship and identity. This population is predominantly Bengali and Burmese. Under the Citizenship Act, all children born in Pakistan are considered eligible for birthright citizenship. However, in practice, this law is not applied to longstanding stateless communities or their descendants born in Machar Colony. The Constitution also guarantees universal education and mandates compulsory schooling at the primary level (ages 5 to 15, up to high school). However, school admission policies requiring a Child Registration Certificate (CRC), which carries a citizenship number, create a distinct barrier for stateless and undocumented children. Acquiring a CRC is difficult as it is linked to generational documents and parents' citizenship status, despite birthright citizenship being enshrined in the Citizenship Act. These children should be assisted in obtaining documentation that facilitates

access to education and ultimately nationality. Instead, they are blocked from both, left entirely dependent on informal schools run by grassroots organizations to receive a rudimentary education.

IMKAAAN WELFARE ORGANIZATION

Breaking Barriers: Sonia Nazar-ul-Islam's Journey from Machar Colony to the National Stage

Ten years ago, Sonia Nazar-ul-Islam entered Khel, Imkaan Welfare Organization's learning and recreational center, as a six-year-old child. Today, she joins the Pakistan Army Girls Gymnastics Team, marking a significant milestone for children facing barriers of statelessness, identity, and marginalization.

As a member of the Sindh provincial gymnastics team, Sonia played a pivotal role in leading her team to gold at the finals of the National Women's Championship. Her achievement underscores the impact of structured mentorship and access to opportunities.

Sonia's success is a testament to the talent that exists in every community, often overlooked due to systemic barriers. Her journey proves that when given the right support, children from Machar Colony and similar communities can rise to compete - and win - at the highest levels.

"Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. Sonia's success proves that with love, guidance, mentorship, and opportunity - not heavy resourcing - children can break barriers and reach the highest levels. She is not alone - many young people in Imkaan's programs are thriving, ready to redefine what's possible."

TAHERA HASAN,
Founder- Director, Imkaan Welfare Organization



Obstacles along the educational journey

The impact of discrimination - direct and indirect – that lies at the heart of why stateless children experience exclusion from formal education systems cannot be understated. There are both short and long-term ramifications.

Stateless children are often left baffled and disillusioned about their identity when they are denied access to school, which may consequently lead to anxiety, depression and a general sense of non-belonging. Their struggles are constant and often combined with other socio-economic challenges which further impact their self-esteem.

Without nationality and commonly also without legal identification, stateless children frequently encounter obstacles that block their access to primary level education, with uncertainty increasing in the transitional period beyond primary school. As a result, stateless children are often undereducated, or uneducated altogether. They are highly unlikely to attain the necessary certifications or qualifications required to advance to tertiary level education, thus negatively impacting their future.

This fragmented journey, as illustrated by Nosizi's story at the opening of this report, can lead to confusion, resentment, broken dreams, and feelings of failure. In addition, because stateless people face restrictions participating in the formal work sector, with many professions often reserved for citizens, their reality – marked by undereducation, a lack of recognized qualifications, and restricted access to certain professions – plays a significant role in the decision to persevere with their education at all, thereby leading to higher dropout rates among stateless children.



OBSTACLE 1: ENROLLING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

It is worth reiterating, that from the outset some states reserve the right to formal public education to citizens only. In these cases, the principal reason that stateless children are excluded is directly linked to lack of citizenship. In other instances, states may allow access to formal public education or may offer flexible admission policies for children unable to comply with registration criteria, including stateless children. However, a birth certificate is usually still the minimum requirement to facilitate the school registration process and enable a child to enrol. This means that, despite clear international standards that stipulate primary education should be compulsory and free (and consequently absent of any impediments that may result in the contrary), the first barrier stateless children face when trying to register for school, occurs due to their lack of legal documentation.

Birth registration – particularly the issuance of birth certificates – may be denied to stateless communities or unavailable due to several factors including exclusion due to status (i.e. lack of legal status, unrecognized minority, stateless community), discriminatory nationality laws, or discriminatory birth registration procedures in law and practice. Without a birth certificate, other forms of legal identification (e.g., child ID cards) may also be unavailable to stateless children, compounding the problem of lack of documentation.

Even where schools apply a flexible approach and accommodate children without birth registration or legal identification, a lack of safeguards to guarantee continuous access to education for those without documentation nevertheless means stateless children face periodic requests for documentation that they cannot comply with. This leads to disruptions or termination of their education.



OBSTACLE 2: COMPLETING PRIMARY SCHOOL AND ENTERING SECONDARY SCHOOL

When transitioning from primary to secondary education, another set of obstacles arise for stateless children. As they enter the stage of “non-compulsory” education, there are several critical junctures that impact a stateless student's educational progression:

- **End of Primary School:** Most schools require an identity document to register and sit end of primary school exams, which are a pre-requisite to enter high school and also to receive a diploma certifying completion of primary studies.

- **Entrance into Secondary School:** In most cases children must transfer to a new institution for high school, at which point it again becomes mandatory to produce legal documentation to enrol. Importantly, it is at this stage that the ‘non-compulsory’ nature of secondary education becomes a determining factor that influences whether a stateless child will continue or abandon their studies, unless there are flexible policies or safeguards in place that ensure they can continue their education.
- **Completing Secondary School:** Legal identification is once again required to sit final exams, but it is also required to record and issue accredited qualifications from the secondary institution. Without legal identity, an accredited high school diploma is practically impossible to obtain for stateless children. This has a

profound impact on their future endeavours by effectively blocking them from accessing tertiary education and potentially locking them into lower skilled and wage-earning jobs.

These critical junctures have a significantly adverse impact on the educational journey of stateless children and consequently, a negative impact on their overall development and wellbeing. Often compounded by financial struggles, which are a common characteristic of stateless communities, these factors frequently converge to leave families with little choice but to deprioritise education – further entrenching their exclusion.

OBSTACLE 1 ENROLLING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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One of the requirements for children to access education in Kenya is having a birth certificate. The digital system introduced in 2018-2019 as a part of the National Education Management Information System [NEMIS] mandates that children without a birth certificate cannot enrol in school. Applications and school fee payments are now processed online through the eCitizen platform, which creates a significant obstacle for the Nubian and other minority groups, for whom obtaining a birth certificate remains a major challenge”



YASAH MUSA,
Nubian Rights Forum,
Kenya

OBSTACLE 2 COMPLETING PRIMARY SCHOOL AND ENTERING SECONDARY SCHOOL

“

In the Dominican Republic for example, education is theoretically accessible to everyone regardless of identification or birth registration documents, but secondary exams cannot be accredited without birth registration or a birth certificate. This also means that tertiary education is usually then not accessible”



BRIDGET WOODING,
OBMICA,
Dominican Republic

OBSTACLE 3 PROGRESSING BEYOND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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If I cannot wear a white coat and treat people's illness, I can wear a black coat and treat the illness of society we live in”



NEHA GURUNG,
Lawyer and equal
citizenship rights advocate,
Nepal

“

I love volleyball and this year I made the ‘under 19’ provincial volleyball squad. It’s a direct opportunity to qualify for the ‘under 19’ national team [of South Africa]. Everyone who was going to the tournament needed a South African ID and passport to participate. When my mom first told me about this, I felt so angry that my opportunity [to play] was being taken away. The thought of it made me feel helpless, which in turn made me bitter, scared and angry. All I could ask my mom was “why me”? I naively thought that that chapter of my life was closed, but this made everything flood back, my future and dreams were still being affected. Even after I was granted my RSA citizenship in 2014, home affairs still wouldn’t give me the proper paperwork I needed.”



DANIELA LIMA RODRIGUEZ,
Statelessness activist,
South Africa

OBSTACLE 3: PROGRESSING BEYOND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Although the right to education encompasses the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ which envisages continuous education extending beyond secondary and even tertiary education; for stateless youths this is usually not a possibility. Accessing vocational or university programmes is normally out of reach given that most tertiary level institutions prioritise access for nationals. Citizens may be eligible for free entry, heavily discounted tuition and/or scholarships, grants or bursaries. In contrast, non-nationals are normally admitted as ‘international students’, and admission requirements often include proof of nationality and financial means – both of which are prohibitive for stateless youths.

If a stateless youth is fortunate enough to eventually gain access to tertiary level education, there is frequently a considerable delay or gap in studies while issues relating to documentation or legal status are resolved. Certain programmes may also be reserved exclusively to a state’s own nationals because these are associated with protected professions. Restricted access to the labour market can also place internships and job placements off limits to stateless youth, further hindering opportunities to pursue or complete advanced studies in a particular area. These circumstances can force young people impacted by statelessness to abandon their original aspiration or ambitions, in favour of accepting any opportunity available.

Neha Gurung is a formerly stateless person from Nepal. As a fierce human rights lawyer, she continues to advocate for equal nationality rights. The turning point in her life came when she had to give up her dream of pursuing a career as a medical doctor because her country’s law denied her citizenship through mother. Her first educational setback as a stateless person came when she attempted to register for her high school final exams. The registration form made the father’s name mandatory. Being raised by a single mother, the registration process was her first encounter with the catastrophe that lay ahead. After high school, her right to pursue higher education and her dream of becoming a medical doctor came to a halt because one needs to produce a citizenship certificate for university-level study.

Through persistent advocacy, combined with legal action,¹⁸ Neha eventually acquired nationality, but she missed several important milestones along the way. She eventually pivoted away from her dreams of becoming a doctor, not because she lost hope, but because circumstances determined otherwise. She was able to informally arrange admission to law school, where she was allowed to begin her legal studies while awaiting citizenship. On reflecting about her past and recognizing the present, she finds solace in being an advocate for stateless people.

OBSTACLE 4: PARTICIPATING IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

When it comes to formal education, it is clear that stateless children are in a severely disadvantaged position from an early stage and then face continuous challenges and setbacks during their education journey – impacting their formative years. In fact, the consequences of exclusion extend beyond academic instruction, affecting every aspect of a child’s developmental journey, including their non-academic life. Lack of nationality can hinder participation in excursions, field trips, sports and other extracurricular activities, potentially leading to significant psychological effects on children who are already marginalized and stigmatized.

15-year-old Daniela Lima Rodriguez was born in South Africa to Cuban parents. At the time of her birth, Daniela was stateless.¹⁹ As a result of successful litigation,²⁰ South African courts delivered a landmark ruling clarifying that Daniela should be recognized as a South African national and directed the Department of Home Affairs to register her as such.²¹ The case set legal precedent in South Africa because it was the first of its kind to recognize the rights of stateless children to acquire a nationality. However, the ruling has yet to be implemented, leaving Daniela in unfortunate limbo having not acquired any proof of nationality or a legal ID, which has had a significant impact on her ambitions and dreams. As a member of her high school volleyball team, Daniela is passionate about volleyball, and she excels at the sport. She often has the opportunity to play national tournaments and represent her school in South Africa, but her lack of identity had presented drawbacks.



Towards solutions – promising approaches

For civil society organizations working in stateless communities, access to education for stateless children continues to be a priority issue. Consultations designed to deepen the shared understanding of the various challenges in different countries led to a clarion call to bring greater visibility to this issue.

In November 2023, ISI and partners spearheaded an *Awareness Month on Childhood Statelessness and the Right to Education*: a global initiative aimed at highlighting the specific challenges stateless children face in accessing education. The campaign also sought to engage and empower stateless children and youths to proactively participate in discussions and solutions affecting their futures.

A consortium of ten partners operating across nine countries²² organized national level events, with ISI taking the lead on several global initiatives, all occurring under the banner of the awareness month campaign. The national and international events involved key stakeholders, including children and youths, who were either directly impacted by the issue, or working with stateless communities. The activities were designed to raise awareness and foster engagement on the topic of childhood statelessness - ranging from educational workshops and storytelling sessions, to art exhibitions and debate competitions.

A key factor in the success of this approach relates to how the campaign supported local partners to create their own individual projects, aligned with the broader campaign goals while addressing unique local challenges and context. This strategy enabled opportunities for children and youth to engage in conversation and showcase their resilience, despite the individual barriers that they face. Importantly, this approach also

demonstrated the transformative power of collective action in prompting much-needed dialogue on the issue. The collaborative approach, sustained over a month of activities, ensured that key messages resonated with diverse audiences, amplifying the reach and impact across regions. The experience can serve as a model for future efforts to continue and expand action to drive change on this pressing issue.

The section below is dedicated to the work undertaken by consortium members during Awareness Month of Childhood Education and Statelessness. Highlights include the profile of the organization, their area of work and details of the individual projects under the campaign.

AUSTRALIA

Our Awareness Month partner in Australia: Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness (PMCS). PMCS facilitated a **statelessness legal clinic workshop** for Australian high school students teaching about childhood statelessness and reflecting on the importance of education.

BANGLADESH

Our Awareness Month partner in Bangladesh: Council of Minorities (CoM). CoM established a **Youth Citizens' Cafes** to raise awareness on statelessness & citizenship rights. They also held a **training workshop** on advocacy and child rights with Youth Citizens Café members and a **Children Art Competition** in Mohammadpur Camps.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Our Awareness Month partner in the DR: Dominican@s por Derecho (DxD). DxD highlighted the subject of education and statelessness in a **podcast** about statelessness and the access to education for children. They also produced an **investigative report** aimed at educating young populations on the situation with education for stateless boys and girls in the DR.

INDIA

Our Awareness Month partner in India: Rohingya Human Rights Initiative (RHRI). RHRI organised a **capacity building workshop** about childhood statelessness for **32 participants** from **10 countries** representing **18 different ethnicities**. In addition, RHRI facilitated a **cultural exchange** involving stateless Rohingya children and youth in India and Bangladesh (Cox's Bazaar).

IRAQ

Our Awareness Month partner in Iraq: Un Ponte Per (UPP). UPP conducted a **workshop** to a group of Dom and Roma youth, training them in the fields of human rights, to promote their right to education and enhance their role in the community. UPP produced and distributed **awareness brochures** about statelessness, every child's right

to education and the enjoyment of other fundamental rights. UPP facilitated a **session between activists and the local government** to draft a document advocating for the rights of nomad communities and enrolling children in schools.

KENYA

Our Awareness Month partner in Kenya: *Nubian Rights Forum* (NRF). NRF worked to **raise awareness** among schools & **advocated to government** for solutions that ensure every child, regardless of their documentation status, can access education in Kenya. NRF organised a **school debate competition** with 8 primary & 8 secondary schools to increase awareness of the importance of birth registration & nationality rights.

MALAYSIA

Our Awareness Month partners in Malaysia: *ELOM Initiatives* and *Iskul Sama Dilaut Omadal (Iskul)*. ELOM **educated 20 to 25 children and youth** from stateless or disadvantaged backgrounds on the issues of statelessness through an incorporated **English language class**. ELOM also ran a **Media and Digital Storytelling Workshops** for children to enhance their public speaking skills and teach them various tools for storytelling and video production. Iskul **printed the Malay translation** of the Girl Who Lost Her Country and the Teaching Guide to directly engage children on statelessness, nationality and rights in their school.

NEPAL

Our Awareness Month partner in Nepal: *Citizenship Affected People's Network* (CAPN). CAPN organised **awareness raising sessions** within **6 higher secondary schools**, discussing statelessness with students using the 'Girl Who Lost Her Country' book & teaching guide. To appeal to youth, CAPN developed an informative **TikTok campaign**, focusing on the procedure and required documents related to birth registration and minor ID card. CAPN also created and distributed **flyers, infographics and pamphlets** explaining the procedure for birth registration that was shared with students' parents, along with a 'Birth Notification Form'.

NETHERLANDS

Our Awareness Month partner in the Netherlands: *European Law Students Association Rule of Law Program (ROLE)* and *two Dutch schools*. After participating in our **train-the-trainer workshop**, law students from ROLE visited the Goois Lyceum, in the Netherlands to **teach high school pupils** about childhood statelessness. The ISI team collaborated with **year 9 students** at the International School of The Hague to teach about the childhood statelessness as part of their Service in Action initiative.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Our Awareness Month partner in North Macedonia: *Bairska Svetlina*.

Jointly **brainstorming** with Roma students, Bairska Svetlina implemented **three creative workshops** on using various digital techniques for storytelling. Bairska Svetlina also worked to deepen knowledge about statelessness, barriers to access education and **experiences with alternative schooling initiatives** within the Roma community.

PAKISTAN

Our Awareness Month partner in Pakistan: *Imkaan Welfare Organization*. Imkaan aimed to foster understanding of statelessness among the **Bengali and Bihari community** members through a **theatre performance**. Through the rehearsals for the play, Imkaan worked with children on their **acting and public speaking skills**. The live performance was filmed to create a short **documentary** for further advocacy.

UNITED KINGDOM

Our Awareness Month partner in the United Kingdom: *Al-Mustafa Welfare Trust*. ISI facilitated a creative workshop for youths at the Al-Mustafa Welfare Trust, where they **engaged Bidoon children** about statelessness & every child's right to nationality. Using **art** as a medium to express the understanding of concepts such as belonging, identity, and exclusion, **participants produced a variety of artwork**.





Childhood statelessness and education awareness month: lessons learned

The experience of organizing a multifaceted, collaborative campaign around the intersection of childhood statelessness and the right to education proved invaluable. The consortium approach was purposefully designed to build solidarity with affected communities, while simultaneously leveraging the respective positions of participating organisations to draw attention to this critical issue.

The first step was to consult with grassroots organizations working directly on the issue within affected communities, to understand the spectrum of obstacles facing stateless children in the education space and how community-based groups were working to address the problem. This delivered a greater depth of understanding of the constraints experienced by stateless children but also revealed the challenges that community-based service providers face, when they step in to offer education services that states are failing to provide. For instance, during the consultations, a common challenge that emerged from partners was that of inadequate resources and capacity to deliver consistent, quality education that could serve as a genuine alternative to the formal system. This challenge was further exacerbated by the absence of accreditation and legal recognition. This not only puts such initiatives at risk of government shutdown at any time, but also prevents them from offering recognized certifications to students. The insights gleaned from the consultation process helped to inform the design of the awareness campaign and the related calls to action.

The second step involved working closely with partners to strengthen their capacity to enable them to engage with children on nationality and statelessness issues in a

child-friendly way. This would lay the ground-work for various local activities that were designed and implemented as part of the campaign. During this period, ISI also convened an Expert Meeting, inviting child rights and education sector specialists such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Special Rapporteur on Education to hear about the specific challenges stateless children face from those working directly in support of impacted communities. By convening child rights policymakers, advocates, education-focused international NGOs, and local community service providers, we facilitated open and dynamic discussions on specific obstacles that were affecting access to education, fostered two-way dialogue incorporating insights from community-based providers and individuals with lived experience of the issue, and established valuable connections. This enabled us to work collaboratively to further refine the calls to action that the campaign was galvanizing behind and to deliver a public event in which stateless children were able to put their questions to child rights policy makers.

The third step was the execution of the month-long awareness campaign in which several local and international events took place, across different regions of the world, demonstrating the truly global nature of this issue, and the profound impact it has on the lives of stateless children. This campaign elevated global recognition of the issue by hosting simultaneous events, amplifying advocacy efforts and fostering community engagement. By bringing together policymakers, educators, and service providers, while also creating platforms for children and youths to share their experiences and perspectives, the campaign sparked critical discussions, strengthened networks, and laid the foundation for sustained action and policy change.

The Awareness Month on Childhood Statelessness and Education underscored the power of collaboration in addressing complex global issues and demonstrated the effectiveness of involving youths in advocacy. It helped to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of stateless children, informing future strategies to support their right to education. Some key learnings from the experience include:



CONSULTATION AND COLLABORATION ARE ESSENTIAL PILLARS FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION

Affected communities know best what their challenges are, and where their solutions lie. More than anyone, they understand the legal barriers and societal prejudices that underly their experiences and should therefore be involved in addressing solutions to their problems. As such, centering communities is a critical ingredient in understanding the issue and finding solutions.

A second critical ingredient is collaboration because speaking in unison to amplify concerns helps to dispel the notion that the issue is an isolated one. Organizing jointly under the banner of a collective awareness campaign proved

to be a powerful way to unite multiple partners around a shared issue. The consortium model created a strong sense of community, enabling individuals and organizations to stand in solidarity, support one another, and engage in meaningful peer exchange. By bringing together different actors who prioritize this critical issue in their unique ways, the campaign created a collaborative learning environment. Focusing on a single issue across different contexts and countries also expanded the initiative's reach and leveraged a wide range of expertise. For instance, organizations with limited outreach capacity greatly benefited from the campaign's broader visibility, helping to maximize impact.

NATIONALITY AND STATELESSNESS ARE NOT "TOO COMPLEX" TO ENGAGE WITH CHILDREN

Often misconceived as an impenetrably complex or overly technical topic, discussions around nationality and statelessness are usually limited to academic and legal circles, with little recognition that these issues can indeed be discussed in other fora. The awareness campaign demonstrated that, with the right tools and approach, nationality and statelessness are topics that can be discussed with children in an appropriate manner.

ISI's complementary resources *The Girl Who Lost her Country* and the *Learning about Statelessness with Neha*. The Teaching Guide, can be used together to engage children, youths and others about nationality and statelessness.

The Girl Who Lost her Country is a children's book which tells the story of a stateless girl called Neha, who travels around the world learning about childhood statelessness in different countries. It helps to demystify the issue and introduce ideas for what kind of action can be taken to address it.

The Teaching Guide provides practical guidance to educators who are teaching children about nationality and statelessness, with an array of activities for different settings.

These and other resources are free-to-access on the website www.kids.worldsstateless.org

In preparation for the awareness month's activities, ISI provided education resources and training to consortium members on engaging children around nationality and statelessness. By exploring concepts like individual rights, belonging and activism, these training sessions helped to build the capacity of educators to answer difficult questions, like why some children did not have nationality or what action can be taken to counter othering and exclusion.

In **Bangladesh**, Bihari children were inspired to express their feelings about statelessness and access to education through art. In **Kenya**, Nubian children participated in debate competitions advocating for their right to education under the Kenyan constitution. In the **Netherlands**, children at an international school designed creative campaigns in

solidarity with stateless children. And throughout the awareness month, Ambassador Neha Gurung hosted a weekly story-time session on YouTube, sharing excerpts from *The Girl Who Lost Her Country*, and answering questions submitted from stateless children around the world.

These activities provide clear examples that engaging children about their rights is not only possible, but it is also the *responsible* thing to do. It helps them to understand and destigmatize their own situation, gives them a vocabulary for articulating their experiences and their feelings, and strengthens their agency.



Awareness Month around the world

NATIONALITY AND STATELESSNESS ARE NOT “TOO SENSITIVE” TO DISCUSS WITH STATES

Just as statelessness is commonly misconceived as being “too complex”, it is often equally considered “too sensitive” to discuss, especially with governments. And while it is true that a thoughtful approach must be considered when determining the most constructive and impactful way to discuss the issue, a key takeaway from this project is that there are effective ways to engage state officials.

In **Iraq**, a partner organisation facilitated a dialogue between local government officials and activists to address the challenges faced by nomadic communities at risk of statelessness, particularly their barriers to accessing education. The initiative spurred the development of an advocacy document that was endorsed by local government representatives, including the Director of Education. This approach was a useful one to pursue, as it helped to bring awareness and led to constructive dialogue around the issue which may not have been previously known or understood.

In **Pakistan**, a local partner took a variety of approaches to engage government officials. They organised a letter writing campaign from children impacted by statelessness to a senior government official, which boosted agency and provided them an opportunity to advocate for themselves. Stateless children also participated in workshops on self-expression, the content of which was later transposed into a theatrical performance, which was attended by senior officials. This approach of using the arts and storytelling to convey the sentiments of impacted children and to break down difficult conversations often deemed “politically sensitive” can open doors for further dialogue, rather than shut them.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROJECTS ARE CRITICAL FOR STATELESS CHILDREN, BUT NEED MORE SUPPORT

In response to the states’ dereliction of duty to ensure equal access to education for all children within their jurisdiction, local civil society organizations have been compelled to respond to the educational needs of stateless children. These organizations are chronically underfunded, given that they generally operate small community-based initiatives that are either off the radar or ill-equipped to attract a meaningful share of the large volume of funding being pumped into the education sector. In addition, such organizations lack the formal recognition necessary to offer a true alternative to formal public education, because their programs are not accredited by the state.

Yet, these organizations are the ones doing the “heavy lifting” to educate children who are excluded from formal public education systems. As long as stateless children do not have full and equitable access to education without disruptions, these organizations ought to be legally recognized and empowered to offer alternative education. The international community, including donors and development agencies, should be doing much more to support these organizations and find ways to ensure that the services they provide can be accredited.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF STATELESS CHILDREN IS KEY IF WE TRULY WANT TO LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND

As we observed during the global pandemic, learning loss due to inconsistent schooling significantly impairs the relationship that children have with education, how they value their studies and their ability to catch up. Frequent interruptions in schooling are also linked to increased school dropout rates, all of which are factors frequently experienced by stateless children whose studies are continually disrupted.

Global efforts to mitigate learning loss since COVID-19 have been focused and determined. However, the same urgency has not been applied to addressing the educational disruptions faced by stateless children, despite widespread commitments to “leave no child behind”. In fact, states have strategically used the guise of ‘sovereignty’ to justify denying nationality, subsequently leveraging the status of non-citizen as an excuse to further deprive those rendered stateless of their human rights. The human rights system has failed to adequately respond to states’ use of this strategy to deny individuals and communities their human rights.

State sovereignty cannot serve as a shield for oppression. The right to education is a human right to be enjoyed by all – including those who have been denied nationality. Unless deliberate action is taken to address the unique challenges faced by stateless children they will continue to be left behind. The barriers they face constitute a conveniently neglected crisis, perpetuated not only by states failing in their obligations to ensure universal access to education, but also by human rights actors who have conceded too much ground to governments in determining who deserves access to education. The result is the exclusion of those who stand to benefit the most - leaving them furthest behind. The same attention and momentum exerted to address learning loss for children post-pandemic, must be applied to stateless children who consistently face disruptions to their studies. Their inability to enrol in school, transition to higher education and study uninterrupted needs to be met with the same vigour, otherwise we risk continuing the disenfranchisement of children and communities.



Conclusion

States bear the primary responsibility to ensure inclusive and equitable access to education to all children within their jurisdiction. Yet countless children around the world remain out of school due to their lack of nationality and the knock-on effects of statelessness on their legal status and access to identity documents.

Even when stateless children are initially granted access to school, their studies are often disrupted due to demands for proof of nationality or identity documentation, which re-occur at various stages during their educational journey. Each interruption marks a significant setback for stateless children and frequently leads to abandonment of studies altogether.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that statelessness is never in a child's best interests,²³ and the global pandemic reminded us that school disruptions lead to anxiety, depression and irrecoverable learning loss in children. As such, there is a need to treat the protection of every child's right to nationality with far greater urgency, while taking immediate and decisive steps to guarantee uninterrupted access to education for stateless children, while their nationality issues are being resolved.

States are failing to meet their obligations to guarantee unrestricted access to education for all children within their borders. Despite promises made in multilateral spaces, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Stateless children are being left behind, and without urgent action, this crisis will only deepen. Grassroots organizations have stepped in to fill the gaps, but their efforts alone are not enough. Now is the time to amplify action and push for real change, and the Awareness Month demonstrated that a concerted and collaborative effort is possible. The recommendations articulated the Open Letter on Inclusive Education outline further concrete steps to address these challenges and ensure every child's right to education is upheld.

Recommendations and call to action

As a part of the Awareness Month on Childhood Statelessness and Education, ISI and partners issued a **Call to Action** with clear recommendations to states, education actors, civil society organizations, United Nations bodies and other relevant stakeholders on steps they should take to ensure education for stateless children is accessible and guaranteed. The Open Letter was widely endorsed by individuals impacted by statelessness, stateless community groups, child society organizations, child rights organizations and others. Those recommendations remain relevant and are reiterated here:

1 STATES to, in consultation with stateless communities, education actors, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, ensure that stateless children have access to education without discrimination, as stipulated in CRC Article 2, and are not excluded from schools due to lack of nationality, documentation or the required legal status. States should also simplify registration processes to ensure accessibility for stateless children, taking into account their lack of nationality and/or documentation. States are further called on to take practical steps and measures that ensure institutions offering non-formal education and informal learning receive accreditation to ease the transition from alternative education programmes. These legal obligations are firmly rooted in international law, as outlined in the CRC Article 28 and ICESCR Article 13, which require states to provide free, universal and compulsory primary education, progressive free secondary education, and access to higher education based on individual capacity.

2 EDUCATION ACTORS, in consultation with stateless communities, work with states to develop policies and programs that address the specific challenges faced by stateless children in accessing education, inclusive of providing the necessary technical assistance and capacity building for states and other stakeholders working on this issue.

3 UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES, in consultation with stateless communities, advocate for the rights of stateless children as per their respective mandates and promote awareness about this issue among member states, while working with states, education authorities and other stakeholders through offering technical and programmatic support as necessary, and to ensure the adherence to international standards and guidelines related to access to education for stateless children.

4 THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING MECHANISMS (including relevant Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures and the UN Human Rights Council) to closely monitor states' compliance with international human rights treaties related to education for stateless children, and offer safe and meaningful ways for stateless communities to engage in these processes, to ensure equitable access to quality education regardless of nationality or legal status.

The **INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY** to make education more equitable by funding the development of schools to serve stateless communities, while supporting non-formal and informal education initiatives and recognizing education as a universal public good with far-reaching impact.

6 ALL STAKEHOLDERS, to draw on the Roadmap for Change as a tool to ensure the meaningful, safe and effective inclusion of stateless children and their communities, in their efforts to improve policies on inclusive education. This includes through incorporating the views of stateless children and child rights defenders to ensure their effective participation in the decision-making process at national, regional and international level.

¹ The Shona are a formerly stateless community in Kenya who originated from Zimbabwe. Although initially documented, a subsequent change in the Registration of Persons Act of prevented them from accessing Kenyan identity cards, and without links to Zimbabwe, they were eventually rendered stateless. In 2020, the Government of Kenya took steps to recognize the Shona minority and by 2021 a further 1,649 people were granted Kenyan citizenship. For more, see: ‘From Stateless to Citizens: the journey of the Shona community in Kenya’, UNHCR Policy Brief, October 2024, available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111718>.

² Nicholas Asego, ‘Meet first Shona woman graduate in Kenya who fights for stateless people’, October 2024, available at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001504202/nosizi-dube-first-shona-woman-graduate-fighting-for-stateless-people>.

³ Nosizi Dube, as cited in the article ‘From stateless to citizens: Kenya’s success offers hope in Africa’, Thomson Reuters Foundation, October 2024, available at: <https://www.cnbcafrica.com/2024/from-stateless-to-citizens-kenyas-success-offers-hope-in-africa/>.

⁴ Nationality refers to the legal bond between a person and a state and, depending on the context, can have a different meaning and connotation from ‘citizenship’. Throughout this report however, these terms will be used interchangeably.

⁵ The UN Legal Identity Agenda defines ‘legal identity’ as “encompassing the basic characteristics of an individual’s identity. e.g. name, sex, place and date of birth conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil”. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/>.

⁶ Formal education is defined by UNESCO as education that is “...institutionalized, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies.” Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isc-ed-2011-en.pdf>, para. 36. The challenges faced by stateless children in accessing education have previously been flagged in a number of reports and studies, including UNHCR, ‘I am here, I belong. The urgent need to end childhood statelessness’, 2015, available at: https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/2015-10-StatelessReport_ENG16.pdf.

⁷ The Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI) is the first and only non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the right to nationality and the protection of stateless people globally. For more information on ISI, please visit: www.institutesi.org.

⁸ Bairska Svetlina (North Macedonia); Council on Minorities (Bangladesh); Development and Justice Initiative (India); Dominicans por Derechos (Dominican Republic); ELOM Initiatives (Malaysia); Family Frontiers (Malaysia); IMKAAN Welfare Organization (Pakistan); ISKUL (Malaysia); Kituo Cha Haki Kibera (Kenya); Nubian Rights Forum (Kenya); Phiren Amenca (Montenegro); Rohingya Human Rights Initiative (India); Rohingya Women’s Development Network (Malaysia).

⁹ These included members of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education and representatives from child rights or inclusive education programmes of a number of UN agencies and NGOs.

¹⁰ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Art. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., Art 3

¹² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 6 (2005): Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin, 1 September 2005, CRC/GC/2005/6, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/42dd174b4.html>.

¹³ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 26); 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Arts. 13 & 14); 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 28 & 29); 1979

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Art. 10); 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Art. 24).

¹⁴ 1952 European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol 1 (Art. 2), 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Art. 11); 1988 American Convention on Human Rights, Additional Protocol (Art. 13).

¹⁵ 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (Art. 22).

¹⁶ For example: 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education; UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 focuses on education) and Education 2030 Framework for Action; Global Partnership for Education (GPE); Right to Education Project (RTE); Global Compact on Refugees (GCR); Global Coalition for Education (GCE); Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children (OOSC); Education Cannot Wait (ECW).

¹⁷ A joint report published by UNICEF and UNHCR in 2021 warned that in “many countries” women can face discrimination which obstructs or hinders their ability to register births, exposing their children to the risk of becoming stateless. These include instances where countries may block birth registration to children born outside of wedlock, or where fathers must be present to complete the birth registration process. In other cases a child’s birth may go unregistered because of the costs associated with the process, or the impracticality or inaccessibility of completing the registration process. UNHCR and UNICEF: Background Note on Sex Discrimination in Birth Registration, 6 July 2021, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/policy/opguidance/unhcr/2021/en/123888>

¹⁸ The Citizenship Affected Person’s Network (CAPN) was founded in 2015 to connect stateless individuals affected by discriminatory nationality laws and support them in advocating for their rights. For more information on its history and ongoing work, please see <https://capnnepal.org.np/>.

¹⁹ Daniela Lima Rodríguez was born in South Africa to Cuban parents. At the time of her birth, Daniela did not acquire Cuban nationality from her parents because under Cuban nationality law, her parents were treated as ‘emigres’, leaving them unable to confer nationality. Daniela did not acquire South African nationality at birth, despite a constitutional provision bestowing South African nationality on children born stateless in South Africa. As a result, Daniela was born and remained stateless for the first decade of her life.

²⁰ Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) is an independent, South Africa based non-profit that specializes in strategic litigation on human rights issues. LHR was responsible for the successful litigation of Daniela Lima Rodríguez’ claim for nationality. For more information about LHR’s activities, please see <https://www.lhr.org.za/>.

²¹ DGLR & KMRG v Minister of Home Affairs and Others (Case No. 38429/13) [2014] ZAGPPHC (3 July 2014), available at <https://lawlibrary.org.za/akn/za-gp/judgment/zagpjhc/2024/1834/eng%402024-02-08>.

²² Bairska Svetlina (North Macedonia); Council on Minorities (Bangladesh); OMBICA (Dominican Republic); ELOM Initiatives (Malaysia); IMKAAN Welfare Organization (Pakistan); ISKUL (Malaysia); Nubian Rights Forum (Kenya); Rohingya Human Rights Initiative (India); Citizenship Affected People’s Network (Nepal) Un Ponte Per (Iraq). Awareness month events also took place in The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Australia.

²³ UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW), UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Joint general comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return, CMW/C/GC/4-CRC/C/GC/23, 16 November 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cmw/2017/en/119567>

