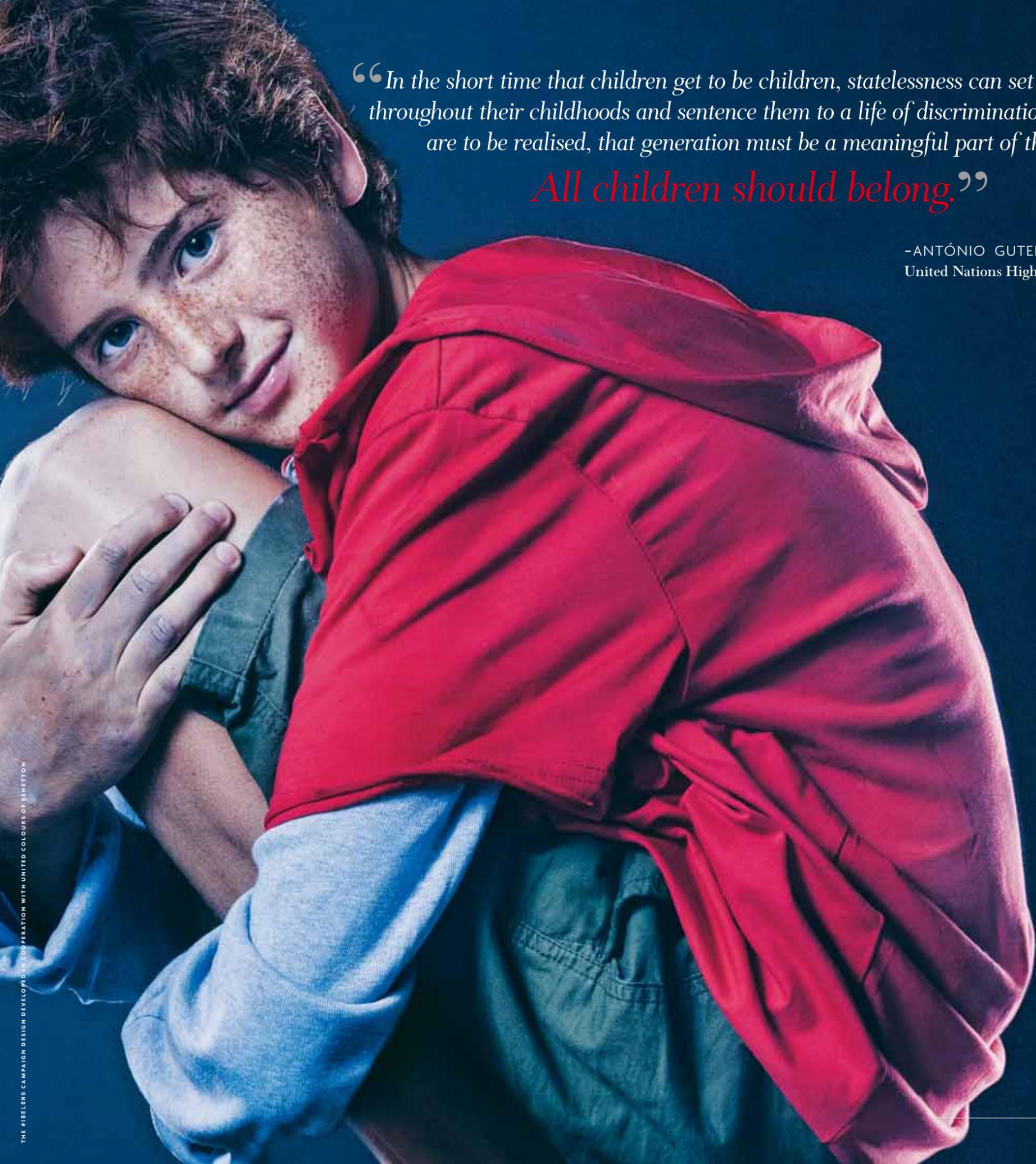


# I AM HERE, I BELONG

THE URGENT NEED TO END  
CHILDHOOD STATELESSNESS

#IBELONG





*“In the short time that children get to be children, statelessness can set in stone grave problems that will haunt them throughout their childhoods and sentence them to a life of discrimination, frustration and despair. If our hopes for the future generation are to be realised, that generation must be a meaningful part of the present. None of our children should be stateless.*

*All children should belong.”*

—ANTÓNIO GUTERRES  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**Stateless children** are born into a world in which they will face a lifetime of discrimination; their status profoundly affects their ability to learn and grow, and to fulfil their ambitions and dreams for the future.

With a stateless child being born somewhere in the world at least every 10 minutes, this is a problem that is growing. In countries hosting the 20 largest stateless populations, at least 70,000 stateless children are born each year.

The effects of being born stateless are severe. In more than 30 countries, children need nationality documentation to receive medical care. In at least 20 countries, stateless children cannot be legally vaccinated.

This report aims to go beyond these statistics, providing direct testimony of children and young people and how being stateless affects them.

In July and August 2015, UNHCR spoke with more than 250 children and youth,<sup>1</sup> and their parents and guardians, in seven countries around the world about their experiences of childhood statelessness.

This is the first geographically diverse survey of the views of stateless children and youth. Many of the children and young people had never spoken to anyone about what it was like to be stateless.

The report highlights how not being recognized as a national of any country can create insurmountable barriers to education and adequate health care and stifle job prospects. It reveals the devastating psychological toll of statelessness and its serious ramifications not only for young people, whose whole futures are before them, but also for their families, communities and countries. It powerfully demonstrates the urgency of ending and preventing childhood statelessness.

<sup>1</sup> Up to the age of 24 years.

EDUCATION

*“It should be the right of every child to study and learn. This is the most important thing.”*

—BOON, 16, THAILAND

UNHCR’s consultations with stateless children and youth found that they confronted myriad challenges when it came to pursuing their education. In some cases, schools denied non-nationals entry to the classroom or demanded the far higher fees applicable to foreigners, making education unaffordable. In others, stateless children were refused admission to final exams or had their diplomas and graduation certificates withheld, halting their progress to higher education and better job prospects. Such children also frequently found themselves ineligible for scholarships or student loans. Whatever the obstacle, the outcome was the same: another young person unable to reach his or her potential.

HEALTH

*“Why do I have to suffer this way?”*

—PRATAP, 15, MALAYSIA

Many young stateless people and their parents were forced to forgo professional treatment, even in cases of serious illness or injury. Travel restrictions, the prohibitively high medical costs imposed on foreigners, discrimination and lack of health education often conspired to impede access to health care for the young people who UNHCR spoke to. In some cases, lack of nationality documents meant that stateless mothers gave birth at home rather than in a hospital, thereby also complicating access to birth registration. Even those who were able to acquire nationality as adults continued to pay a psychological toll as a result of their stateless childhoods.

BEING A CHILD

*“I don’t play baseball this summer.”*

—JOE, 13, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

In addition to denying children their rights to education and health, statelessness also threatened the freedom of many to feel secure, to play, to explore – to simply be children. Labelled as outsiders in what they saw as their own country, many had to deal with discrimination from an early age. Some had already lived through experiences that had forced them to grow up far too quickly, such as working from a young age, living in insecure housing arrangements or suffering harassment by the authorities. In more extreme cases, stateless girls and boys were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

EMPLOYMENT

*“The doors of the world are closed to me.”*

—JIRAIR, 19, GEORGIA

Left unresolved, statelessness created new and insurmountable roadblocks for many of the young people moving from adolescence to adulthood who were interviewed. The single most-cited frustration of the young stateless women and men consulted for this report was the lack of jobs that matched their ability, ambition and potential. Barriers to education and freedom of movement played a major role in limiting job opportunities and denied many the chance to break previous cycles of poverty and marginalization – the impacts of statelessness being passed from one generation to the next. All the young stateless adults consulted had settled for a life that allowed them to meet their basic needs but fell far short of the future they had imagined for themselves.

SOLUTIONS

# I am here, I belong



The strongest message to emerge from the consultations with the children and youth was their sense of identification with the countries in which they had been born and had lived all their lives. In almost all cases the best solution to statelessness is to turn a child’s existing links with his or her country of birth and upbringing into the legal bond of nationality. It is vital that this be achieved as early as possible so that no child grows up with the indignities and harm caused by statelessness.

The prevention and resolution of childhood statelessness is one of the key goals of UNHCR’s Campaign to End Statelessness in 10 Years, or by 2024. To achieve this goal, UNHCR urges all States to take the following steps in line with the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness:

- Allow children to gain the nationality of the country in which they are born if they would otherwise be stateless.
- Reform laws that prevent mothers from passing their nationality to their children on an equal basis as fathers.
- Eliminate laws and practices that deny children nationality because of their ethnicity, race or religion.
- Ensure universal birth registration to prevent statelessness.

# INTRODUCTION

In July and August 2015, UNHCR spoke to more than 250 children, young people,<sup>2</sup> their parents and guardians, civil society and governments in seven countries: Côte d'Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Georgia, Italy, Jordan,<sup>3</sup> Malaysia and Thailand,<sup>4</sup> about the experience of childhood statelessness. It was the first time that such a comprehensive and geographically encompassing consultation on the views of stateless children and youth had ever been undertaken. It was also the first time that most of these young people had ever spoken to *anyone* about what it was like to be stateless.

Drawing on individual testimonies collected during these consultations, this report demonstrates how statelessness can significantly impair the ability of children to learn, grow, play and lead productive and fulfilling lives. It highlights how statelessness can create insurmountable barriers that prevent access to education and adequate health care and stifles job prospects. It reveals the devastating psychological toll that statelessness can take not only on young people but also their families, communities and countries.

Today, several million children are watching their childhoods slip away without the sense of belonging and protection that comes with a nationality. This is all the more startling given how robust the international human rights framework is when



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it comes to protecting children's rights, including the right of every child to a nationality. This right is protected under Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty ratified by 194 out of 196 countries. It is also reflected in numerous other international and regional instruments. As the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child re-

cently concluded: "[B]eing stateless as a child is generally the antithesis of the best interests of children."<sup>5</sup>

No child needs to be stateless. Whether a child has been left stateless because of discriminatory nationality laws or other reasons, childhood statelessness is entirely preventable. Recognizing the harm that childhood statelessness inflicts, and implementing straightforward legal and practical measures to prevent it, will allow governments to ensure that children's very real connections to their countries are recognized through the grant of nationality.

Consultations with stateless children and youth in Malaysia in progress.

2. Up to the age of 24.

3. In Jordan, the consultations were limited to the prevention of statelessness amongst Syrian refugee children.

4. These countries were selected because of the existence of known stateless or at risk populations (Jordan), taking into account geographical diversity.

5. African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Nubian Minors v. Kenya, Decision, 22 March 2011.

## THE MAIN CAUSES OF CHILDHOOD STATELESSNESS

### DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination – for example, on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion or gender – is the major cause of statelessness globally. The majority of the world's known stateless populations belong to a minority group, and at least 20 countries maintain nationality laws which deny nationality or permit the withdrawal of nationality on the grounds of ethnicity, race or religion.

In some countries, even where the law is discrimination-free, the practice can be very different. For example, in the Dominican Republic, despite a clear entitlement to nationality under the law, individuals of Haitian descent have frequently been denied Dominican nationality by the civil registry.

Worldwide, 27 countries have nationality laws that do not allow women to pass their nationality to their children on the same basis as men. This can leave a child stateless in situations where the father is stateless, has died, has abandoned the family or is unwilling or unable to transmit his nationality. “My children don't have nationality because their grandfather was stateless and their father is stateless too and I can't do anything for my children. In the Lebanese system, the mother cannot transmit nationality to her chil-

dren or husband [...] If my children's situation doesn't change, they have no future,” says Amal, a Lebanese national and mother of nine-year-old Rama, who is stateless.

In Italy, a personally prepared application or an individual's declaration of willingness is required to acquire nationality through naturalization. Christina, born stateless in Italy but now entitled to Italian nationality because she has reached the age of 18, is physically and intellectually disabled. It is difficult for her to understand the concept of citizenship, let alone consent to acquiring Italian nationality or prepare a personal application. As a result, she has been denied the opportunity to submit an application for nationality, something that her stateless Roma father, Sandokan, finds impossible to accept: “For my daughter, the right to nationality is the only right she has.”

Annick, 13,  
Côte d'Ivoire.



Christina, 18,  
and her family, Italy.

© UNHCR / F. MARTINO

### GAPS IN NATIONALITY LAWS

Safeguards in nationality laws against statelessness at birth prevent statelessness from being passed down from one generation to the next. They also help to avert statelessness where parents have a nationality but are unable to confer it on their child, or where a child has been abandoned and the parents are unknown. More than half the States in the world lack or have inadequate safeguards in their nationality laws to grant nationality to children born stateless in their territory. In certain cases, nationality laws may include safeguards, but there may be gaps in their application. This is a major cause of childhood statelessness – at least 70,000 stateless children are born each year in the countries hosting the 20 largest statelessness situations.

Abandoned children whose parents cannot be identified (foundlings) are another group at risk of statelessness. Nearly one third of all States lack provisions in their nationality laws to grant nationality to such children found in their territory. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the absence of this safeguard combined with the country's history of immigration and civil war means that out of an estimated stateless population of 700,000 individuals, some 300,000 are thought to be foundlings.

Annick (13) was left in the care of her grandparents in Côte d'Ivoire when she was very young. A few years later, her grandparents died. She was then placed in

the care of a family from the same ethnic group. As her birth was never registered, there is no official proof of her parentage. Her foster family has tried to trace anyone who could testify with regard to her parentage, to no avail. The authorities consider Annick's parentage to be unknown, which means she cannot be considered an Ivorian national and remains stateless.

### LACK OF BIRTH REGISTRATION

Lack of birth registration can make it difficult for individuals to prove that they have the relevant links to a State that entitle them to nationality, and therefore creates a risk of statelessness. This is because birth registration indicates where a person was born and who his or her parents are – key pieces of information needed to establish which country's nationality a child can acquire.

Lack of birth registration creates a particularly high risk of statelessness for specific groups, such as refugees and migrants, as well as nomadic and border populations. Birth registration is therefore of vital importance to, for example, Syrian refugee children born in countries of asylum, many of whom have been separated from their parents or families; it would help prevent statelessness among these children, ensure they are recognized as Syrian nationals and allow them to return to Syria when conditions permit.

## EDUCATION

The stateless children and youth consulted for this report confronted numerous challenges when it came to pursuing an education. In some cases, schools denied non-nationals entry to the classroom or demanded fees applicable to foreigners, rendering an education beyond reach. In others, stateless children were refused admission to final exams or had their diplomas and graduation certificates withheld, halting their progress to higher education and better jobs. They frequently found themselves ineligible for scholarships or student loans. Even when other factors were favourable, educational opportunities were cut short because stateless youngsters were denied permission to move within or beyond their countries' borders. Whatever the obstacle, the outcome was the same: another young stateless person unable to reach his or her potential.

### PRIMARY EDUCATION – NOT ALWAYS A RIGHT

Virtually all of the young stateless people that UNHCR spoke to had been able to attend primary school. While the Dominican Republic, Italy, Malaysia and

Thailand do not restrict access to primary education for stateless children, in Côte d'Ivoire and Georgia identity documents are officially required. Despite this, almost all those consulted had found a way to go to primary school, although not without struggle and often reliant on the flexibility and goodwill of school principals and teachers.

A number of the parents and children recounted having to persuade school staff regularly to keep the door to the classroom open. "If you don't have documents you are bothered about it at school all the time and you feel embarrassed. But I was able to finish school with the help of my teachers," says Isabella, a young stateless woman of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic.

This too was the case for Ketí (19), in Georgia. She says she was only able to attend school because the school director took pity on her. She recalled the strong sense of gratitude that she felt towards this official, as he would have been personally liable had authorities discovered that he was permitting an undocumented stateless child to attend the school.



Thida,  
18, Thailand.

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## OBSTACLES TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Though the majority of the young people consulted expressed a strong desire to graduate from secondary school and attend university, very few had been able to achieve either of these ambitions. In Côte d'Ivoire and the Dominican Republic, passing the national exams at the end of primary school is a prerequisite for admission to high school. However, the ability to sit for such exams is often limited to those who can prove nationality.

In Thailand and Italy, attending school after ninth grade is often challenging. In Thailand, although there are no formal barriers to higher education, those interviewed explained how travel restrictions

imposed on stateless people in the country and the lack of access to scholarship programmes and student loans reserved for Thai nationals, obstructs their access to higher education. "I get pretty good grades," says Patcharee (15), a stateless hill-tribe girl in Thailand. "Maybe I am even at the top of the class. But every time there is a scholarship, it is given to someone who has a national ID card." Her classmate Boon (16), echoes a sentiment expressed by many of the children who were interviewed in all the countries: "It should be the right of every child to study and learn. This is the most important thing."

## NEGATIVE IMPACT ON SELF-ESTEEM AND BEHAVIOUR

Having to negotiate one's way through the school system frequently results in delays in starting school or moving on to the next term, putting stateless children and youth several years behind their peers. This will often have an impact on them even after they have been able to confirm their nationality. Maria, a young woman in the Dominican Republic, says: "I was not able to attend school for four years because I didn't have a birth certificate. When I finally received my birth certificate I was relieved, but also felt like I had lost four years of my life."

Sometimes, arbitrary practices by the authorities leave even children within the same family with different nationality status – and therefore different opportunities. "Some of my siblings have documents and have been able to go to university. I'm from the same parents but I can't go to university because I don't have documents," says Alejandra, a young stateless woman born in the Dominican Republic.

A few children have seen their lack of nationality, and inability to attend school, lead to serious social problems. In the case of Edwin (16), a stateless boy of

Tamil origin in Malaysia, the impact of being deprived of the discipline and socializing benefits of school was stark. Orphaned at a young age, he grew up in a foster home without proper care or support. Unable to attend school because of the high 'foreigners fees' imposed on those without an ID card, he fell in with the wrong crowd and became addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Now on the road to rehabilitation, Edwin draws a strong connection between his situation and his lack of nationality: "If I had a document showing that I was a national I probably wouldn't be where I am today. I probably wouldn't have mixed with the wrong company and wouldn't have picked up bad habits. I would be in school and on my way to chasing my dreams of being a football player for Malaysia. I have my own style. It's called the Edwin style. It's better than Ronaldo's style, although he did inspire it."

BOON,  
16, THAILAND

Edwin, 16,  
Malaysia.

*"It should be the right of every child to study and learn. This is the most important thing."*

More than 30 countries require documentation to treat a child at a health facility. In at least 20 countries, stateless children cannot be legally vaccinated. Travel restrictions, the prohibitively high medical costs levied on non-nationals and discrimination conspired to impede access to health care services by many of the stateless children and youth surveyed. This not only affected their ability to participate in preventive child-health programmes, it also prompted decisions to defer or forgo professional treatment even for serious illness or injury. The psychological toll of childhoods spent stateless also had

PRATAP,  
15, MALAYSIA

*“Why do I have to suffer this way?”*

King,  
18, Thailand.

serious consequences for the self-esteem and future prospects of some of the young people, even if they were able to acquire nationality during adulthood.

#### OBSTACLES TO TREATMENT

Many participants in the consultations said they had difficulties in accessing health care due to lack of national identity documents. In Italy, Roma parents noted that because their stateless children were not able to use public paediatric services or child health education, they had resorted to taking them to the emergency departments of public hospitals, even for basic ailments. Sandokan, the stateless Roma father of disabled Christina, says: “It’s important for parents to receive health education from a qualified paediatrician. Information on nutrition and immunization – you won’t get this from the emergency department of a hospital. But that is our only option for health care – even for a sore throat.”

In Malaysia, parents and guardians of young stateless children with profound disabilities spoke of the difficulties they faced in trying to access State care and support for these children. Santosh, the father of a 14-year-old boy suffering from spina bifida, was unable to obtain a State-sponsored wheelchair, necessary for his son’s mobility. He finally managed to raise the funds through a community NGO. In Italy, Sandokan worries constantly about his disabled

daughter’s health and ability to take care of herself without State support. “While I am around I can look after her,” he says, “but I won’t be able to look after a disabled child for another 30 or 40 years.”

#### COST BARRIERS

The most significant barrier to accessing health care highlighted by participants in the consultations was the high cost of treatment. Although States frequently offer subsidized or even free health services to their nationals, a person who is stateless will often have to pay the higher fees imposed on foreigners. This often puts much-needed treatment out of reach.

For some of the parents interviewed, the prohibitively high costs of treatment applied to non-citizens, meant that their own births and those of their children had taken place at home rather than in a hospital, making it difficult to secure birth registration documents. In a few cases, parents admitted that they would consider fraudulently using the nationality identity documents of friends and neighbours. Shanti, the mother of a stateless boy of Tamil origin in Malaysia, says: “My son is four years old, he has never been to a hospital. He was even born at home. Why? Because he does not have citizenship. If he gets very sick in the future and needs to go to hospital we will just borrow someone else’s documents.”



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### **RISK-TAKING, HUMILIATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SCARS**

For some, seeking assistance or loans to access health care was not even an option. Unable to provide the necessary documentation to obtain treatment and unable to afford the high costs, the family of Jirair (19) in Georgia took the risk of treating him at home despite the seriousness of his injuries. “When I was younger,” says Jirair, “I broke my leg. Even though I needed to, we didn’t go to the emergency department of the hospital because we knew that without [nationality] documentation we would not be admitted. I was treated at home. I took a long time to heal – it was really hard”.

The constant humiliation of not being able to prove one’s eligibility for treatment was raised as a significant impediment by a number of participants. Elena, a stateless mother in the Dominican Republic,

remembers the battle she waged to convince the medical staff at the hospital to help her child: “It is humiliating not being able to present documents. Even at the hospital I was told that I couldn’t get treatment for my baby because we didn’t have documents. They only helped us after long persuasion.”

Kavita (22) in Malaysia explains how being stateless made her hesitant to get medical attention, even when it was clear that she needed it: “Lately I have been coughing a lot. And there has been blood. I visited a clinic and took medication but it didn’t work. The clinic told me to go to the hospital, but to go there is very embarrassing. They ask a million questions about where I am from because I don’t have proof of nationality. They are suspicious and it makes me feel like I am stealing something. So I can’t go.”

Tragically, a childhood of living with statelessness appeared to have extracted a serious psychological

toll on a significant number of the participants. Individuals frequently described themselves as “invisible”, “alien”, “living in a shadow”, “like a street dog” and “worthless”. Others, like Paloma (16) in the Dominican Republic described the paradoxical sentiments of belonging yet being excluded. Says she: “I feel Dominican, regardless of documents, but people see me as less Dominican because of my lack of documents.” In Malaysia, a dejected Kavita has thought of drastic actions. “Sometimes I feel that I should attempt suicide,” she says. Only thinking of her family has prevented her from taking that route.

Leli (19), who had been stateless since birth but recently acquired Italian citizenship, spoke of her difficulties in coming to terms with her new identity as a national: “Even though I now have Italian nationality,” she says, “being stateless stays inside you – like a permanent mark.”

# “I don’t play baseball this summer.”

**JOE,**  
13, THE DOMINICAN  
REPUBLIC

**In addition to denying fundamental** children’s rights, statelessness threatened the freedom of the participants to feel secure, to play, to be carefree – to simply be children.

Competing in sports and enjoying school holidays are things that many children take for granted, but the story was often very different for the children and youth who were consulted. Labelled as outsiders in what they saw as their own country, they had to deal with being treated differently from an early age. Some were also forced to grow up too quickly – because they had to work from a young age, live in insecure housing arrangements or endure troubled relationships with authorities. In more extreme situations, these children found themselves prey to exploitation and abuse.

## GROWING UP TOO SOON

Like children anywhere, many stateless children spend their spare time playing sport and dreaming of careers as professional athletes. But the wings of such dreams are often clipped early on. As Niran (16), in Thailand, explained: “I want to play with others. But sometimes, because I don’t have nationality, I cannot join the competition. I really want to be a professional football player.”

In the Dominican Republic, many of the participants highlighted baseball, the most popular sport in the country, as their favourite recreational activity. Even though some of them had proven abilities to take their hobby a step further, playing baseball competitively was simply out of the question: “My son was offered the possibility to join a team and go and play baseball even abroad. But without docu-

ments it is not possible for him to register with the team”, explained one mother.

By imposing limitations on access to work and welfare services, statelessness often places a severe financial strain on families, forcing even the youngest family members to work. In Georgia, access to all State services, including social assistance, requires identity documents. Jirair says: “When you do not have documentation, you are not entitled to any assistance [...] I have always worked, ever since I was very young. I have responsibility for my grandmother. She is also stateless.”

Some teenagers in the Dominican Republic revealed how they spent their school vacations scavenging in the hopes of earning a little extra

income for their families. One of them is Joe, who can often be found “on vacation” in the San Pedro de Macoris rubbish dump. Set among the sprawling sugar plantations in the eastern part of the country, this “playground” is where he spends entire vacation days, sorting through the rubbish for scraps of metal. He says can earn up to 50 pesos (just over one USD 1) per day.

“I like going to school,” says Joe, who lives with his family and attends school in nearby El Soco, one of the cinder-block compounds built to house plantation labourers and their families since the first half of the 20th century. “I especially like maths,” he says, although his baseball cap suggests another interest shared by almost all Dominican youth. “When I grow up I want to be a baseball player,” he confesses. “But I don’t play baseball this summer.”



**CONSTANT INSECURITY**

Statelessness may also expose children to experiences that can make them feel insecure and frightened to move around. In Malaysia, Sajna (19) recalls an incident when she was just 17 that has stuck with her: “Two years ago I was on a bus which was stopped at a roadblock. The police were looking for bandits. They checked me and because I did not have any proof of nationality they took me off the bus. It was so embarrassing; as if I was a criminal. I went to the police station and we finally settled the matter. It was a terrible experience.”

Joseph (23) in Côte d’Ivoire explains how he fears leaving his home village: “I can’t move around because the police and gendarmerie ask for documents. I don’t have documents so they ask me for money. Because I can’t pay, they threaten to beat me and arrest me.”

Security was seen as integrally linked to citizenship. One stateless parent from Italy, Dumitru, recalls how, as an 18-year old, he had faced arrest and been threatened with deportation. Another stateless father, Sandokan, noted that Italian nationality was an especially important form of protection in light of the fact that his family was readily identifiable as Roma and thus subject to discrimination.

In Thailand, Artee (18) explains that without citizenship, her family could, at any moment, be evicted from their home: “My mother bought land informally from someone she knew, but because none of us have

nationality she could not have her name put on the title to the land. I feel really frightened that our home could be taken at any time”.

**VULNERABILITY TO EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE**

Statelessness can also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, and in extreme cases, lead to exploitation and abuse. In Côte d’Ivoire, many abandoned children are stateless and their lack of documents proving their identity and nationality makes their already precarious situation even more so. David (10) is not able to go to school because his caregiver believes it would not be possible without documents. His situation has taken a serious toll on him; he is incontinent, and as a result is made to sleep alone. While his friends and foster siblings study, David takes the family’s sheep out to pasture and does chores around the house.

Mistreatment can take different forms as stateless children grow older. Clémentine (22) and Odile (21) are stateless sisters living in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. When they were very young they were made to work in a restaurant and later forced into prostitution by the aunt in whose care they had been placed as small children. Lacking the protection of nationality documents they found themselves trapped. Only after the situation became intolerable did they find the courage to flee. However, they lost all their belongings, including the birth record of Clémentine’s four-year old son, leaving him at a high risk of statelessness.

JIRAIR,  
19, GEORGIA

“The doors of the world are closed to me.”

**The single most cited frustration** of young people consulted for this report was the lack of jobs to match their ability, ambitions and potential. Left unresolved, statelessness created new and insurmountable roadblocks for them as they were moving from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Whether as a result of their limited access to educational opportunities or inability to travel as freely as their national counterparts, stateless youth often found that statelessness held them back from freedom, independence and a break from the poverty and marginalization they had grown up with. Many revealed how they had settled for a life that allowed them to meet their basic needs, but fell far short of the future they had imagined for themselves.

**UNCERTAINTY AND DISILLUSION**

Most of the young people interviewed revealed that as they approached school-leaving age they developed an acute sense of the impact that statelessness would have on their future prospects. “My entire life is a question-mark,” says Vikash (23) from Malaysia, summing up the frustration, uncertainty and disillusion about the future articulated by many of the stateless youth that UNHCR spoke to. He and others wanted to travel to work in Singapore or India, but without travel documents even a journey beyond the borders of their federal state could land them in detention.

Javier (19) in the Dominican Republic, now a construction worker, has unfulfilled ambitions because without documents proving that he is a national, he has not been able to acquire the necessary academic qualifications: “I want to study law because being a

lawyer is a profession that I respect” he says “My dream is to practice law and help people with problems.”

Many of the stateless young people interviewed said they had realized how severely their employment horizons were curtailed because of restrictions on their travel to look for work beyond their local communities and districts. As King (19) from Thailand says: “To get a good job I need work experience. But each time I want to travel beyond the district borders I have to get a permit. It’s a real hassle and means that I miss out on the experience I need to be competitive. I watch others surge forward. Sometimes I feel like this is the end.”

Through persistence and determination, some stateless youth have made it to the end of demanding and competitive selection procedures – only to be refused employment because their lack of nationality prevented them from meeting formal requirements for the job.

Kavita in Malaysia wanted to teach art but no college would admit her because she was stateless. Undeterred, she applied for a job with the local nursery school, but despite excelling during the interview she was refused employment because she could not set up a bank or pension account. Now, she works in a friend’s grocery store. “It’s a dead-end job,” says Kavita. “But, for now this job has been very helpful since I don’t have proof of any nationality and can’t work anywhere else. But I wish to become a teacher. It’s been my ambition since I was very young. I now tutor children at my uncle’s house. It’s how I keep my dream alive.”

Unable to acquire professional qualifications, many stateless young people pursue vocational courses



Kavita,  
22, Malaysia.

PHOTO: R. ARNOLD

or voluntary work just to obtain some useful skills. Valentino (21) a stateless Roma man, convinced his municipal council to allow him to attend a baking course. “I have done a municipal course in pizza making,” he says. “I became really good. I worked at a friend’s pizzeria and the customers asked if there

was a master pizza maker in the house! I even started teaching pizza-making to Bangladeshi migrants in the course. I would love to have my own pizzeria but for that I need to get citizenship. I want to find a job, a house. I want a regular life. For others, these things might seem trivial, but for me they are not.”

### ERODING DREAMS

A feature common to the stateless individuals consulted was the sense of dreams unravelling before they could even begin to be realized. Talented individuals with a strong desire to contribute to their communities and societies were being forced to settle for the limited opportunities on offer to those without a nationality. “I want to become a doctor,” says Julia (16) in the Dominican Republic. “I want to help people, everyone in the community who gets sick – you don’t only help people who have money. But I’m losing hope because I don’t have documents. I won’t be able to take the final high school exams and go to university.”

Jirair in Georgia, who aspires to be a wrestler, knows that time is running out: “The doors of the world are closed to me. Everybody left for a tournament and I stayed behind to train here alone. The coaches support me, saying: ‘It is OK, be patient, keep training.’

Everybody leaves and when they come back they are full of new updates. I listen to their stories and inside I am crying. But I still hope to become a good coach for young people, to set a good example. The one thing I need to achieve my dreams is citizenship.”

Artee (18) of the Akha community in Thailand is a serious and diligent student with a strong sense of pride in her school and her community. She leads student volunteers in local reforestation projects, campaigns against drug trafficking in her community and provides assistance to those recovering from addiction. Her peers and teachers regard her with respect. Artee’s real passion is dance. “My dream is to be a dance teacher,” says the 18-year-old. “I want to teach traditional dance and other dances in a government school in the mountainous area. I want to conserve and show Thai culture to other people around the world. But I think it’s impossible because I don’t have Thai nationality.”



Artee, 18, Thailand.

UNHCR / A. ARNOLD



Javier, 19, The Dominican Republic.

UNHCR / M. REDONDO

Artee worries that without citizenship, her dream will be shattered and that she will have to return to work on her parents’ farm. Her fellow classmates have their dreams too – mathematics teacher, policeman, musician – but they too are waiting to have their Thai nationality confirmed. They are all members of the Akha community and many lack any nationality.

However, in some places hope is being kindled, as governments begin to realize the difference that granting a nationality can mean to the lives of young stateless people, and to the valuable contribution they can make to the prosperity, security and well-being of the communities in which they live.

**Following important reforms** to Thailand’s nationality and civil-registration laws and the adoption of a progressive national strategy to address nationality and legal status, there are signs of hope in the district of Mae Fa Luang, in Chiang Rai province, where Artee and her friends learn, play and grow up together. The district office in Mae Fa Luang is focused on resolving the nationality and documentation issues that children like Artee face, and has established procedures to address the problem. The District Commissioner understands the value that these children put on an ID card showing that the holder is a Thai citizen. “I have a lot of sympathy for those who don’t have nationality,” he says. “Nothing can compensate for the rights that these children would have if they were Thai”.

Promising initiatives are also underway elsewhere: in Côte d’Ivoire, a simple declaration procedure has been put in place to allow stateless individuals with longstanding ties to the country to acquire Ivorian nationality; in Georgia, recent law reforms now allow stateless people to have their status recognized and puts them on a clear path to acquire Georgian nationality; in Malaysia, the government has established a campaign to increase its efforts to promote access to nationality and is accepting applications from stateless people to grant them Malaysian identity cards through a civil society initiative; steps are being taken in the Dominican Republic to restore nationality to stateless individuals who were deprived of their Dominican nationality; and Italy is on the verge of becoming a party to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which includes important safeguards to prevent childhood statelessness.

# I am here, I belong

**The strongest message** to emerge from the consultations with children and youth was that they exist and want to be recognized. “I am a human being;” “It’s a fact, before your eyes, that I exist;” “I am a part of this society;” “We are all of this earth,” were among the common sentiments expressed. Despite not being recognized as nationals of the countries in which they were born and had lived their entire lives, almost all

the children and youths consulted felt deeply loyal to their country: “I feel Dominican ... regardless of documents,” says Paloma from the Dominican Republic.

None of the participants consulted had chosen to be stateless, and statelessness had not stopped any of them from establishing ties or wanting to participate in and contribute to their communities. “This is the best country in the world,” says Julio (23), in the

Dominican Republic, “but every country has some defects that we need to work on. You need to have an ID to be able to do that.”

International law recognizes the right of every child to a nationality. This is clearly set out in Article 7 of the almost universally ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states: “The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.”

This protection is reflected in numerous other international and regional instruments. Human rights bodies and UN institutions have emphasized that the principle of the best interests of the child demands that children be protected from statelessness.

In almost all cases of childhood statelessness, the best solution is to give children the nationality of the country they were born in and have lived all their lives. It is vital that this be achieved as early as possible so that no child grows up with the privations caused by statelessness. It is not only in the child’s best interests, but also in the interests of the State to address statelessness at birth or as soon as possible afterwards. Stateless children must also be allowed to enjoy their basic rights, including to education and health, until they acquire a nationality. This also contributes to integration and social cohesion.

Once their legal status is resolved, stateless children can pursue their dreams and contribute to society: “Now that I have a cedula [national ID], I have proof that I am a Dominican and I can do anything that any other Dominican can do,” says Wildiana (18).

The prevention and resolution of childhood statelessness is one of the key goals UNHCR’s **#IBELONG** Campaign to End Statelessness in 10 Years. To achieve this, UNHCR urges all States to take the following steps, in line with Actions 2, 3, 4 and 7 of UNHCR’s Global Action Plan to End Statelessness:

- Allow children to gain the nationality of the country in which they are born if they would otherwise be stateless.
- Reform laws that prevent mothers from passing their nationality to their children on an equal basis as fathers.
- Eliminate laws and practices that deny children nationality because of their ethnicity, race or religion.
- Ensure universal birth registration to prevent statelessness.

**The conflict in Syria**, the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, has driven more than four million refugees into neighbouring States. Displacement on this scale is placing children at risk of statelessness. Because of gender discrimination in Syria’s nationality law, Syrian children can only acquire nationality through their fathers. But the conflict has left some 25 per cent of Syrian refugee households without fathers to help verify nationality, making a birth certificate naming a Syrian father the sole means of proving a child’s citizenship in many cases. As one Syrian refugee father noted: “If they don’t have a birth certificate, it’s like they don’t exist.”

Reem (21) was forced to flee Syria in 2014, while pregnant, after a bomb killed her husband and destroyed her home. Once in Jordan, she gave birth in a hospital located within the main refugee camp in Zaatari, to her son Adnan. Reem knew that the process of registering Adnan would be difficult without her husband and without the marriage certificate that the couple did not obtain in Syria—a legal requirement when registering new births in all countries in the region. A lot of Syrian refugees dream of one day returning to Syria and raising their babies in peace. Mohammad (33), father of three children worries: “One day we will to return to Syria. But how can we if I have no way to prove my children are Syrian?”

Fortunately, the Jordanian Government has established a personal status court (Shari’a court) and civil status department within the Zaatari refugee camp to validate and register marriages and ensure that every child begins life with a birth certificate. The certificate serves as proof of identity and shows the child’s link to Syria. “Irrespective of the circumstances, as long as a birth takes place in Jordanian territory, it is our responsibility to register it,” says the chief of the Civil Status Department. In two years, the births of 3,597 Syrian children born in Zaatari Camp have been registered.

**Stateless children and youth** are not asking for special treatment. They are only asking for equal treatment: the chance to have the same opportunities as other children. It is our responsibility to give them this chance.

*“Just like my friends and others, I wish to live a normal human life.”*

KAVITA, 22, MALAYSIA



Zainab and her baby boy, Syrian refugees, Jordan.

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