



Stateless: Trapped in Legal Limbo

By Susan Perri
Photographs by Joseph Quinnell

Millions of people worldwide lack citizenship from any country, are denied basic rights, and are left without homes or hope.

There are roughly 195 countries on earth, and over 6.7 billion people living in them. Among these, caught in a perfect storm of politics and prejudice, are between 12 and 15 million stateless people with no nation to call home. These undocumented people live in a constant state of legal limbo. Without citizenship or basic human rights, they are permanent victims of social injustice.

Although they reside within borders worldwide, stateless individuals are denied the right to have rights. They do not have the rights of a citizen or even a refugee, and cannot own property, work legally, travel freely, or have access to healthcare and education. Without access to basic social services, they are often victims of terrible crimes, yet they have no hope of assistance from the police or court systems. In many cases, stateless individuals are under constant threat of arrest and deportation due to lack of paperwork.

The reasons for statelessness vary from country to country and case to case. In many countries around the world, children can be born stateless because citizenship is not automatically granted at birth; because citizenship can only be passed onto children by their fathers; or because parents are stateless themselves. Hill tribe peoples sometimes go unrecognized by the government of the country in which they reside, and many times birth registration laws are unknown in rural areas, or are difficult to implement. After conflicts between warring countries, borders are sometimes redrawn; whole villages, whose people were once documented citizens, lose their status. Often, discrimination prevents these people from being granted new citizenship. Many times, the few legal rights stateless people do have are not fully understood by the population and small government offices rarely implement new laws intended to smooth the pathway to citizenship.



What is "statelessness?"

Statelessness is the condition of lacking citizenship from any country. It is estimated that there are 12-15 million people worldwide who are stateless.

Without citizenship, stateless individuals are denied the right to have rights. They have limited or no access to education, healthcare, work or freedom of movement.



Education, a key to change

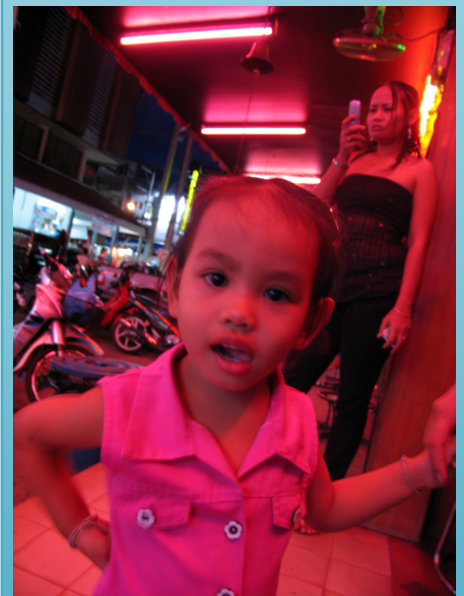
Poverty, homelessness, and hunger within stateless families cycle from one generation to the next as stateless parents give birth to stateless children. Due to their lack of documentation, stateless children are denied entrance to classrooms and are unable to receive a formal education in grades K through 12. Even those children enrolled by parents in “free” schools operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do not ordinarily make it far into their education. Most parents do not acknowledge the importance of their children’s education because, due to their statelessness, the children will never be able to work legally. Even with a high school diploma, most children will lack access to a college education. Around the third or fourth grade, desperate parents pull their children from school in order to engage them in work or to sell them. Stateless children and youth are at extremely high risk for falling prey to some of the worst crimes of humanity-- human trafficking, child labor, or forced induction into the military or prostitution. Children lacking documentation can easily disappear without hope of ever returning home.

Without education for stateless children, there is no hope for change. Stateless populations are trapped within a cycle that repeats itself from one generation to the next. Children are robbed of their youth and potential, and are left with no dream for a future.

Efforts underway, but little change

Despite the gravity and scope of this problem, statelessness is a relatively unknown issue. Experts working in the field of human rights estimate that only 20 people worldwide are working on statelessness and, currently, very few organizations are solely dedicated to combating it. Most organizations working to address needs such as shelter, food, and schooling in places of impoverishment are unaware of the statelessness of many of the people they are attempting to help.

Providing immediate aid to stateless populations is vital, but tackling the root cause of their problems – their statelessness – is even more crucial in sustaining long-term relief. A few organizations working on statelessness, such as Refugees International and the Open Society Foundations, have devoted resources to combating statelessness on a policy level-- fighting court cases, lobbying governments, and calling for the United Nations to be more active. Some organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The International



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“Children can be born stateless”

Observatory on Statelessness, and Vital Voices, are working on preventing statelessness-- through birth registration, the gathering of statistics to document the issue, and the publishing of academic studies. All of these efforts, however, are only a fraction of what is needed.

All long-term and large-scale proposed solutions to the issue of statelessness include working with governments to create policy change-- something that the United Nations is perhaps best positioned to do. In 1948, the United Nations adopted The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, among other basic rights, states that, "Everyone has the right to a nationality," and, "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality." But because not all "nationals" are "citizens" some have criticized the declaration for not being specific enough to clearly address the issue of statelessness. The United Nations has also hosted conventions focused on statelessness: the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, although only 65 states were party to the 1954 Convention, and only 37 were party to the 1961 Convention. So far, the United Nations has not made the issue a budget priority, and has devoted an extremely small department within the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to addressing statelessness through identification, prevention, reduction, and protection. On their website, the UNHCR has stated their 2011 call to action, saying, "The refugee agency will use the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention to generate momentum towards accessions in order to buttress the international legal framework for the prevention and reduction of statelessness, and protection of stateless persons. It has launched the Statelessness Conventions Campaign to work with governments to this end."

Even with these efforts underway, stateless populations have seen little change. Statelessness is a particularly complicated and sensitive political issue because citizenship is a right that can only be granted by individual governments. There remains an overwhelming need for public awareness on the issue of statelessness. Creating universal awareness would enable the public to take action-- calling for the United Nations to prioritize the issue, challenging governments to pass and implement laws to protect stateless populations within their borders and grant citizenship, and empowering stateless populations by providing them with an international platform. Once there is global awareness on this issue, a widespread movement is possible.



"Stateless populations have seen little change"



"No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality."

A note from the author

Most likely this is the first time that you have heard of the issue of statelessness. If you have never met a stateless person, it can be hard to feel connected to the issue. Understandably, you might also feel overwhelmed by the scope or complexity of the problem of statelessness. So, why should you care, and what can you do?

I have been lucky enough to travel to Southeast Asia several times while working as a Co-Director of the non-profit The Thailand Project: Higher Education as Humanitarian Aid. My partner on the project, Joseph Quinnell, co-founded The Thailand Project with me to create hope for stateless children and youth in Southeast Asia through education and advocacy. Most of the work that we do is in Thailand, a country with a stateless population estimated at over 2 million--perhaps the largest in the world.

Our work has often allowed us to befriend stateless individuals, mostly children, and we have been able to see the effects that statelessness has had on their lives. We have seen the fear in their eyes as they travel a few minutes from their home and need to cross a military checkpoint. We have heard them express a longing to attend school. We have felt the hopelessness of their current situation each time we avoided asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" These children are intelligent, creative, and capable. They could easily be doctors, teachers, and lawyers if they were given an opportunity-- but instead they are part of a lost generation. Behind the overwhelming statistics and complex reasons for statelessness languish the people whose lives it dramatically affects.

What can you do to help?

To date, successful efforts to combat statelessness have been mostly fought on a case-by-case basis. With 12-15 million stateless people worldwide and approximately 20 individuals combating the issue of statelessness, the math isn't very reassuring. But, by reading this article, you have already expanded the network of people who are aware of statelessness. As more people know that statelessness is a problem worldwide, more increasingly effective solutions can be implemented.

Because public awareness is a crucial step in enacting widespread policy change for the issue of statelessness, sharing information you have learned is important. Also, do some research! This article only scratches the surface of this issue. There are some fantastic, reliable resources on the web to help you to learn more, both about the issue and about the organizations that are taking action to combat it. Many of the statistics in this article are from sources that can be found on The Thailand Project website: www.thethailandproject.org. Click on INFO to find a compilation of the most recent and reliable resources including articles from The New York



Above: Joseph Quinnell and Susan Perri pose with a young stateless girl. They were able to help her enroll as a student at an NGO in Thailand. She was ten years old when she first entered a classroom—prior to that she was a child laborer at a local guesthouse.



Times, the United Nations, and Refugees International.

Finally, you can support organizations that are working to combat statelessness and implement policy change. To show your support, you may wish to join a Facebook group, or a mailing list, to receive the latest updates on the issue, hear the needs of an organization, or participate in movements an organization might be planning. Organizations might need donations – even a \$5 gift can help – and some organizations accept in-kind donations (such as frequent flyer miles) that help to defray costs. Because this year marks the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention, keep your eye out for additional ways you may be able to participate.

Thank you for caring about the people affected by statelessness, and for doing what you can to help!

Susan Perri helped to co-found The Thailand Project: Higher Education as Humanitarian Aid with her partner, Joseph Quinnell. She now co-directs the non-profit with Quinnell. Perri is a firm believer that anyone, no matter what age, can make a difference-- whether it is for a neighbor on the other side of the street or a neighbor on the other side of the world! She may be contacted at sperri@thethailandproject.org

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