

A Call to Include the Stateless on International Human Rights Day

Today, as the world marks international human rights day, millions of stateless persons continue to live in silence and exclusion, unable to participate in public life as equals, to freely organise and express themselves and to associate with others. The focus of this year's celebration - 'inclusion and the right to participate in public life' – is consequently particularly pertinent to the stateless among us. Under this theme, the provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which enshrine the freedom of assembly and association (Article 20), the right to take part in elections, in public life and decision-making (Article 21) and the freedom of expression and opinion (Article 19) are being celebrated, scrutinised and reflected upon worldwide.

All persons in Europe should benefit from the protection of these rights provided for by the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights. However, hundreds of thousands of stateless persons in Europe continue to have little or no access to these and other fundamental rights despite the region's advanced human rights framework. The daily exclusion and voicelessness experienced by over 600,000 stateless persons in Europe and 12 million worldwide, bring into stark perspective the importance of human rights which guarantee our ability to be heard, to associate with others and to participate in democratic processes.

Decades after 'universal and equal suffrage' has been achieved through long and difficult struggles to secure the rights of women and minorities in Europe, stateless persons remain without a right to vote – politically voiceless and democratically irrelevant.

Stateless persons are entitled to freedom of association and expression under international law. However, in practice they face significant barriers in realising these two fundamental freedoms which are cornerstones of both human rights law and democratic participation. The voice of stateless persons has largely been rendered mute, as they are excluded from mainstream society. Stateless migrants in Europe are often viewed as illegal immigrants and criminals who must be dealt with harshly, through detention and futile efforts at removal. Equally, stateless populations that have lived in Europe for generations are likely to be minorities that are discriminated against, treated with suspicion and shunned by society at large. Stateless people often lack resources to organise themselves into effective movements, and human rights law has not been adequately enforced to ensure that they too enjoy their fundamental rights.

The European Network on Statelessness (ENS) is a civil society alliance with over 60 members in over 30 countries committed to address statelessness in Europe. We believe that all human beings have a right to a nationality and that those who lack nationality altogether are entitled to adequate protection – including the freedom to speak and be heard, to associate with others and to partake in democratic processes. In light of strong pledges made by many European countries to end statelessness, identify and protect stateless populations and ensure their enjoyment of human rights, ENS marks international human rights day by drawing attention to the hundreds of thousands of stateless persons in Europe, whose voices should count as much as our own, but do not.

As Europe and the world mark the importance of the right to take part in elections and public life and the freedom of expression and association, celebrate the individual and collective struggles that have secured these rights for all, and recognise the positive impact they have made on countless individuals and entire nations, we call on countries in Europe and elsewhere to end statelessness and ensure that those without a nationality are not also deprived of a voice and a stake in our collective future.