

Research paper

Stateless or Apatris: In the margins of Dutch and Greek society

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ABSTRACT

Statelessness remains one of the most overlooked human rights issues in contemporary Europe, affecting over 600,000 individuals who exist in legal limbo without nationality, documentation, or access to fundamental rights. This study examines the lived experiences of eight stateless individuals—five men and three women—residing in Greece and the Netherlands, exploring how the absence of legal identity impacts their daily lives, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and social integration. Through qualitative interviews and comparative policy analysis, significant gaps between international legal commitments and practical implementation in both countries are revealed. While Greece has ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, it lacks a functioning Statelessness Determination Procedure, leaving individuals without formal recognition or protection. The Netherlands, despite introducing such a procedure in 2023, provides recognition without necessarily conferring residence rights or meaningful inclusion. The findings which were acquired through semi-structured interviews demonstrate that stateless individuals face severe barriers to education, employment, and social participation, with children generally experiencing better access than adults. The study identifies critical policy gaps, including inadequate birth registration systems, bureaucratic complexity, insufficient legal support, and discrimination against vulnerable ethnic minorities, which perpetuate cycles of exclusion across generations. We propose comprehensive reforms including establishment of accessible determination procedures, strengthened birth registration safeguards, improved data collection, enhanced cross-cultural training for officials, and harmonized European policies aligned with the 2024 European Pact on Migration and Asylum. Addressing statelessness requires not only legal recognition but also practical mechanisms that restore dignity, equality, and the fundamental human right to belong.

Keywords: statelessness, apatris, human rights, education access, legal identity, migration policy, Greece, Netherlands, social exclusion, European pact on migration and asylum

In an era of unprecedented global mobility and displacement, statelessness represents one of the most profound violations of human dignity and rights. To be stateless—or apatris, from the Greek meaning "without a homeland"—is to exist in the margins of modern nation-state systems, lacking the fundamental legal identity that most people take for granted. Stateless individuals cannot access basic services, exercise political rights, or move freely across borders. They are, in effect, invisible to the state apparatus that structures contemporary social, economic, and political life.

Europe, despite its strong human rights framework and commitment to international conventions, is home to more than 600,000 stateless persons (ENS. 2024). This population includes long-established Roma communities, children born to undocumented migrants, individuals affected by state succession following the dissolution of

Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, Palestinian refugees, Bidoon from Gulf states, and ethnic minorities subjected to discriminatory nationality laws. While European nations have largely ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, significant gaps persist between legal commitments and practical implementation. Many states lack functioning Statelessness Determination Procedures (SDPs), leaving individuals without an official mechanism to prove their status and access corresponding protections.

This study examines statelessness in two European contexts: Greece and the Netherlands. These are countries with distinct legal frameworks, administrative structures, and migration histories. Greece, positioned at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, has experienced dramatic refugee influxes while simultaneously managing austerity-induced cuts to public services. The Netherlands, with its more developed welfare infrastructure and recent implementation of an SDP, represents a contrasting approach to addressing statelessness. Through comparative analysis of legal frameworks, policy implementation, and lived experiences, this research illuminates the structural barriers that perpetuate statelessness and identifies pathways toward more inclusive, rights-based solutions.

The key research questions which guide this research are the following:

- How does statelessness affect individuals' access to fundamental human rights?
- What are the primary social, legal, and economic barriers faced by stateless people?
- What are the educational policies implemented by Greece and the Netherlands that aim to create a positive impact?
- How do Greece and the Netherlands differ in their approaches to statelessness?
- Which are the good practices implemented by each country?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Statelessness remains one of the most overlooked human rights issues in Europe. According to the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless person is someone who is not recognized as a national by any state under the operation of its law (United Nations, 1954, p. 117). Despite the existence of international frameworks, thousands of individuals in Europe and particularly in Greece continue to lack legal identity, adequate protection, and access to fundamental rights.

Statelessness can emerge from many different causes. It often results from gaps or inconsistencies in nationality laws, especially where safeguards for children are missing. It can also arise from state succession or territorial changes, from discrimination against certain ethnic, linguistic, or cross-cultural groups, or from barriers in civil registration systems where births and other vital life events go unrecorded (Alifrev, 2011; Van Wass, 2008). Forced displacement also contributes, as people who flee conflict or persecution may lose their documentation or fail to meet the legal requirements for nationality in the countries where they arrive. Throughout Europe, vulnerable communities such as the Roma, Kurds, Palestinians, and individuals from the former Soviet Union or Yugoslavia continue to be disproportionately affected (Sigona & Trehan, 2009).

The consequences of statelessness are severe and pervasive. Without any official nationality, individuals are frequently barred from accessing education, employment, healthcare, legal residence, social services, and political participation (Arendt, 1951). Their freedom of movement is restricted, and the absence of recognized identity creates persistent uncertainty and social exclusion. Stateless individuals exist in the margins of society, often unseen by official systems and unable to advocate for their rights.

While most European countries have ratified the 1954 and 1961 Conventions, significant gaps remain between legal commitments and practical implementation. The legal frameworks of many states are inconsistent, and some do not have a dedicated Statelessness Determination Procedure, leaving individuals without an official mechanism to prove their status (UNHCR, 2020). In many countries, safeguards that should prevent children from being born stateless are either weak or absent (Lynch & Ali, 2018). The 2024 European Pact on Migration and Asylum calls for enhanced cooperation among member states to address these protection gaps, yet implementation remains uneven across the European Union (European Union, 2024). Even in states with appropriate laws, complex bureaucratic procedures and administrative delays create additional barriers. Discrimination, particularly against ethnic minorities such as the Roma, reinforces the cycle of exclusion and leaves many people undocumented for generations (European Roma Rights Centre, 2016).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that educational inclusion for marginalized populations, including stateless individuals, requires not only legal frameworks but also cross-cultural pedagogical approaches and institutional commitment to equity (Essomba, 2017; Essomba & Tarres, 2021). This work highlights that periods of austerity demand increased investment in educational access for vulnerable learners (Essomba, 2017).

Statelessness in Greece

Greece hosts several stateless populations, including Roma communities, ethnic Turks from Western Thrace, affected historically by Article 19 of the Greek Nationality Code, children of migrants and refugees, individuals repatriated from the former Soviet Union and asylum seekers whose nationality cannot be verified (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2019). Although Greece has ratified the Convention, its procedures for determining statelessness remain fragmented and unclear (ENS, 2021). Applications for recognition often move through asylum or migration channels, which were not designed to assess statelessness, resulting in delays and confusion. Applicants must frequently navigate complex legal and administrative systems without support.

There are several key problems that contribute to statelessness in Greece. Birth registration remains an issue in certain areas, particularly among marginalized communities, undocumented migrants, and itinerant groups. Children born outside formal systems may go unregistered, leaving them without legal identity. Stateless individuals also often lack secure residence status, relying instead on short-term permits or living without documentation altogether. This insecurity limits their access to healthcare, housing, employment, and social protection. In education, although Greek law theoretically guarantees access for all children regardless of status, undocumented or stateless children may face administrative reluctance, delays, or outright denial of enrollment (UNHCR, 2025). Some schools or individual officials within them avoid taking responsibility for children who cannot provide standard documents, even though they are legally entitled to attend.

Statelessness in the Netherlands

The Netherlands generally has stronger civil registration systems, more consistent data collection, and clearer pathways for nationality acquisition, especially for children (Vink et al., 2015; Vink et al., 2019). The country records statelessness in municipal registers, making stateless individuals more visible to authorities. However, the Netherlands still lacks a fully independent Statelessness Determination Procedure, meaning individuals may still face obstacles in obtaining official recognition of their status (ENS, 2024).

RESEARCHING STATELESSNESS

It should be clearly noted that the legal status of stateless persons, and particularly their lack of citizenship, creates a priori obstacles to education, employment, and daily life in general. Therefore, this legal status highlights the need for a supportive framework within the host country through which these gaps can be addressed. To address this gap, the study examined the challenges faced by stateless persons in accessing education as a consequence of their legal status. Greece and the Netherlands were selected as comparative case studies because Greece has received a significant number of stateless persons since the 2015 refugee crisis, while the Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of refugee reception and a more established framework for identifying and supporting stateless individuals. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that, in both countries, bureaucratic obstacles continue to hinder the development and implementation of effective integration measures.

This study is rooted in qualitative methods commonly used in statelessness research, including the analysis of legal frameworks, case studies, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected through oral semi-structured interviews conducted using a predefined interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. This approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives.

Research in this field requires strict ethical safeguards because stateless individuals often experience stigma, discrimination, and legal vulnerability. Ensuring anonymity, voluntary participation, emotional safety, and responsible data handling was an essential concern when gathering information from people who may fear negative consequences if their identity is disclosed.

Participants and sampling

The participants in this study were eight stateless individuals (five men and three women), who generously contributed their experiences through personal narratives. Their backgrounds reflect a wide demographic range: two participants (male, female) were between 18 and 30 years old, another two (male, female) were aged 31 to 40, and four (three males and one female) were between 41 and 50. Three of them lived in Greece at the time of participation, while the remaining five resided in the Netherlands.

Although all identified as stateless, their countries of previous habitual residency varied, with five originating from Palestine and the others from Algeria, Sudan, and Kuwait, the latter specifically identifying as Bidoon. This diversity in geographic, cultural, and historical backgrounds provided a rich foundation for understanding the many dimensions of statelessness in a European context.

One Palestinian participant had completed higher education in Greece and worked as a translator and interpreter in several refugee camps, offering particularly nuanced insights into the intersections of education, displacement, and humanitarian work.

Their collective testimonies formed the core of this research, revealing how statelessness impacts daily life, education, work, and social integration in both Greece and the Netherlands.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews administered in Greek, English and Dutch, online between January 2025 to June 2025. These semi-structured interviews consisted of both closed and open-ended questions covering personal background, legal status experiences, access to education, employment barriers, experiences of discrimination, and interactions with support organizations. The average duration of each session was approximately 30 minutes, depending on the flow of the discussion and any follow-up questions that arose. All participants provided informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity.

Data analysis

Interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns across participants' narratives regarding educational access, employment barriers, legal recognition processes, and experiences of social inclusion or exclusion. Additionally, Legal and policy documents from both countries were reviewed to contextualize participants' lived experiences within existing frameworks. Finally, comparative analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences between experiences in Greece and the Netherlands.

RESULTS

Access to education

Across the participants' narratives, access to education emerged as one of the most emotionally charged and uneven experiences. Although laws in both Greece and the Netherlands technically allow stateless children, and in some cases adults, to attend school or take part in training programs, the practical reality is far more complicated. For stateless individuals without documents, the possibility of entering or continuing education is influenced not only by legal rights but also by bureaucratic barriers, school discretion, personal resilience, and the availability of community or NGO support.

Table 1 presents demographic information and selected responses from three (3) stateless male participants in Greece (M1-M3), demonstrating the severe restrictions they face in employment, travel, healthcare, and legal recognition. Common themes include inability to work legally, restricted access to healthcare, challenges with residence permit renewals, and lack of freedom of movement.]

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that children generally had better access to education than adults. One participant explained that he was unable to continue his studies or pursue IT training because he was repeatedly asked for documents from Kuwait that he could not obtain. At the same time, he mentioned that young children in his camp were able to attend public schools, with NGOs assisting them through translation services and transportation. While Greek legislation, such as Law 4939/2022, allows both children and adults to access educational programs, these opportunities are not always implemented consistently.

Parents in both countries often expressed relief that their children could eventually attend school, yet the experience was far from straightforward. In Greece, some children were unable to participate in school trips abroad because they lacked the necessary papers or a Greek passport. Others encountered delays in enrollment due to the absence of identification documents, leaving school administrators uncertain about how to handle their cases. Language barriers created an additional layer of difficulty for newly arrived families.

Table 2 presents demographic information and selected responses from five (5) stateless participants in the Netherlands (M4-M8), showing more positive educational experiences overall, particularly regarding access to language courses and integration programs. However, challenges persist regarding legal status requirements for higher education after age 18, high income requirements for residence permits, and ongoing barriers despite official recognition.]

In the Netherlands, parents generally reported more positive experiences. One father noted that his children were fully integrated into the school system and felt welcomed. Nonetheless, even there, some children had to wait for their residence status to be formalized before they could register. Missing paperwork, uncertainty about procedures, and institutional hesitations often produced frustration and confusion, even within an otherwise supportive educational framework.

While children tended to gain access to school eventually, adults frequently faced significantly greater challenges. For many stateless individuals, finishing high school, accessing vocational training, or pursuing higher education remained out of reach. Several participants described being turned away because they lacked birth

certificates, school records, or other documents from their countries of origin—documents that were impossible to obtain. One individual in the Netherlands shared that although he was later able to enter a vocational program, the entire process was difficult, especially because the courses were in Dutch and he had to work harder than his classmates to keep up. Others were able to take language classes or enroll in training once their residence status was secured, but overall, it became clear that adult stateless individuals are often excluded from education not because they lack motivation but because existing systems are not built to accommodate people without documentation.

Table 1*Greek Samples*

	M1	M2	M3
Origin	Palestine	Kuwait (Bidoon)	Algeria
Age Range	31-40	41-50	18-30
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Years of Residency in Current Country	16	4	8 months
Examples of Common Answers	«Επειδή είμαι χωρίς ιθαγένεια δεν έχω τα βασικά δικαιώματα που όλοι θεωρούν δεδομένα. Δεν μπορώ να ταξιδέψω ελεύθερα δεν έχω διαβατήριό, κάθε τρία χρόνια χρειάζεται να κάνω ανανέωση της άδειας παραμονής μου και αυτό συνεπάγεται να ανανέωση ξανά όλων των εγγράφων μου ακόμα και για την περιθαλψη.	« Yes, many things. I can't legally work, which makes it very hard to survive. It's difficult to rent on my own without documents. Healthcare is very limited too, emergencies only. I also cannot travel, I cannot see family in other parts of Europe. My lack of papers means fear of police checks.	I cannot work legally, I cannot have a bank account.
Can you tell me a little about yourself and your situation as stateless person?	×	×	
How long have you lived in Greece?			
Are there things you cannot do because you don't have citizenship or legal papers?	×	×	×
Have you tried to apply for legal status or citizenship? What is that process like? (duration, possible fees, etc.)	×	×	×
Have you been able to go to school or university? If yes, can you tell me about your experience? (or about the educational experience of your children)	×	×	×
Were there any difficulties enrolling in school or accessing education (like needing documents, paying fees, or discrimination)?	×	×	×
Have you ever experienced discrimination? If yes, how did you deal with it?	×	×	×
Are you currently feeling accepted in the society where you live, why?	×		×

Table 2*Dutch Samples*

	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Origin	Palestine	Palestine	Palestine	Sudan	Palestine
Age Range	41-50	18-30	41-50	41-50	31-40
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female
Years of Residency in Current Country	6	4	4	28	4

Table 2*Continued*

	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Examples of Common Answers	Yes, I was lucky to attend Dutch language courses through an integration program. Later, I was accepted into an MBO (vocational training) program. It was challenging at first because everything was in Dutch, and I had to catch up with younger students. But education has been one of the few areas where I've felt some hope. I want to continue to university someday.	Yes, I've been able to continue my education. The experience has been positive overall, and I'm thankful for the opportunities I've had.	Yes, I can go to school to learn the language. My children also went to school and are now integrated into schools.	Children generally go to school up to the age of 18, status or not. After 18, if they don't have the right to stay, they lose the right to study.	I was stateless and had an expat visa. What applied on me same like other expat. High requirements. For example, ensure I have sponsorship, enough income. Access to school is right in the Netherlands regardless status.
Can you tell me a little about yourself and your situation as stateless person?	×	×	×		
How long have you lived in the Netherlands?		×	×		×
Are there things you cannot do because you don't have citizenship or legal papers?	×		×	×	×
Have you tried to apply for legal status or citizenship? What is that process like? (duration, possible fees, etc.)	×	×	×	×	×
Have you been able to go to school or university? If yes, can you tell me about your experience? (or about the educational experience of your children)	×	×	×	×	×
Were there any difficulties enrolling in school or accessing education (like needing documents, paying fees, or discrimination)?	×		×		
Have you ever experienced discrimination? If yes, how did you deal with it?	×			×	×
Are you currently feeling accepted in the society where you live, why?		×	×	×	×
Are there organizations, groups, or people who support you and in which ways?	×	×	×	×	
If you could change some things about the way governments treat stateless people, what would these be?	×	×	×	×	×

Role of community support

The role of community support proved essential in shaping how participants navigated these obstacles. In Greece, NGOs played a major role in enabling children to attend school by assisting with paperwork, translation, and integration. In the Netherlands, individuals frequently mentioned organizations such as the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk), which helped them understand bureaucratic processes, fill out forms, and access basic services (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2023). Participants emphasized that without such organizations, many of them would not have been able to access education or public services at all.

Still, not everyone had access to this kind of assistance. One participant who arrived in Greece before the large refugee movements explained that, at the time, support networks were scarce and public awareness of statelessness was low. Others stressed that although general refugee support exists, very few organizations focus specifically on the needs of stateless people. An important exception was ASKV in the Netherlands, which established the Stateless Rights Collective to advocate for stateless individuals (ASKV, 2025). These examples illustrate how critical external support can be but also highlight the gaps that continue to leave many stateless people without the help they need.

Employment and financial barriers

Beyond education, participants described significant obstacles in their daily lives, particularly in relation to employment. Access to legal work emerged as one of the most pressing challenges across both countries. Several participants stated that because they lacked recognized citizenship or permanent residence permits, they were simply not allowed to work legally. This forced many into informal jobs that were unstable, low-paid, or exploitative. Some could not even open a bank account, creating further barriers to financial independence.

Five of the individuals explained that their professional qualifications were not recognized in Europe. One Palestinian participant, who had worked for fourteen years as a director at a special needs institution, was unable to use his professional credentials in the Netherlands because the state did not recognize Palestine as a country, and therefore, did not accept his certificates. This produced deep frustration, as individuals who possessed valuable skills were prevented from contributing to society in meaningful ways.

The difficulties often began the moment people arrived in the host country. The asylum or residency process could take years, during which individuals were not permitted to work and had limited access to healthcare and services. One participant in the Netherlands said that he had to wait over two years just to obtain a temporary residence permit, which left him without income or stability. Another, whose permit listed his nationality as "unknown," explained that this label restricted his opportunities even further, as he could not open a business account or apply for certain jobs that required proof of nationality. The emotional toll of this prolonged uncertainty was significant. For some, the inability to work or progress professionally affected their sense of purpose and dignity. One man expressed how, even after twenty-seven years in the Netherlands, the ambiguity of his legal status continued to undermine his attempts to integrate fully.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Legal and institutional frameworks

Understanding and addressing statelessness requires both a legal framework aligned with international standards and practical mechanisms that offer real protection to individuals affected. Greece and the Netherlands each reflect a different trajectory in their approach to statelessness, both shaped by historical, legal, and political contexts. While both countries have taken steps to address the issue, notable divergences in implementation, recognition procedures, and access to rights reveal strengths and shortcomings in their respective systems.

Greece: Commitment without full implementation

Greece has shown formal commitment to the issue of statelessness by ratifying the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons without reservation. However, its overall legal and institutional architecture remains incomplete. The country has not ratified the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, nor the 2006 Council of Europe Convention on Avoidance of Statelessness in the Context of State Succession. This limits Greece's ability to comprehensively tackle statelessness in line with the broader international framework.

Greek national legislation provides a definition of statelessness aligned with the Convention, and certain legal safeguards are in place to prevent statelessness at birth. For instance, children born in Greece who would otherwise be stateless can acquire Greek nationality, and adopted children gain citizenship upon adoption by Greek nationals. The introduction of digital birth registration in 2020 was a welcome step, helping to document children born in public hospitals, including those born to undocumented mothers (ECRE Country Report:

Greece 2024). Yet, these measures often fall short in practice, particularly for vulnerable groups like Roma, refugee populations, and children whose parents lack diplomatic representation.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of a dedicated Statelessness Determination Procedure (SDP). Although Greek law assigns responsibility for such a procedure to the Asylum Service, the absence of an implementing Presidential Decree has prevented operationalization (ENS Greece 2021). As a result, individuals may remain in legal limbo, identified in asylum or migration processes but not formally recognized as stateless or granted the protections associated with that status.

While naturalization laws do offer reduced residence requirements and fees for stateless persons, these provisions are undercut by the real risk of detention and the lack of alternatives. Stateless individuals may be held in detention for up to 36 months if subject to both asylum and removal procedures (Global Detention Project, 2023). Legal safeguards, such as access to legal aid and vulnerability assessments, are inconsistently applied.

When comparing Greece and the Netherlands, a clear gap emerges between legal promises and real-life experiences. On paper, both countries have taken significant legal steps: they have ratified international treaties, created procedures to recognize statelessness, and introduced paths to naturalization. Yet the testimonies reveal that implementation often falls short.

In Greece, despite legal provisions for stateless individuals and access to naturalization, many participants described extremely slow procedures, language barriers, bureaucratic confusion, and repeated requests for documents they could not obtain. One participant emphasized that even after gaining temporary protection, he still faced long waiting periods, multiple interviews, and administrative delays. Another spoke of his children being admitted to school but excluded from everyday activities due to lack of papers. Such experiences reflect the ongoing gap between theoretical protection and the lived reality of navigating Greek bureaucracy.

The Netherlands: Legal recognition with limited protection

In contrast, the Netherlands has more recently introduced important reforms, notably with the implementation of the Statelessness Determination Procedure Act in October 2023 (ENS Netherlands, 2024). This law establishes a formal procedure for individuals to be recognized as stateless and officially registered as such in the Personal Records Database (BRP). For those legally residing in the country, this recognition provides access to certain administrative rights, including eligibility for naturalization under more lenient conditions, such as a shorter residency requirement and lower fees.

In the Netherlands, recent reforms allow individuals to register officially as stateless, which can speed up the naturalization process (ENS Netherlands, 2024)

Yet recognition alone does not guarantee residency rights or access to essential services. Participants still face barriers to employment, travel, and financial independence. Many struggled emotionally with the ambiguity of their legal identity, particularly those labeled as having an "unknown nationality," a classification that carries fewer protections than formal statelessness. While support systems in the Netherlands appear stronger than in Greece, significant gaps remain, especially for individuals awaiting legal status.

Crucially, the Dutch SDP is accessible not only to documented residents but also to undocumented individuals. However, the benefits of recognition remain largely symbolic for those without legal status. Acknowledgement as stateless does not automatically confer a right to reside in the Netherlands or access protection under immigration law. Thus, many continue to live in a precarious legal situation, recognized as stateless yet excluded from meaningful legal and social inclusion.

Nonetheless, the introduction of a formal SDP represents a significant advance in aligning Dutch policy with international standards. It offers a pathway to clarity and potential integration for those who have lacked documentation and legal identity. The recognition of stateless status can simplify access to nationality and resolve the "unknown nationality" classification that often creates additional barriers, particularly in naturalization procedures.

Still, the Dutch approach is not without limitations. The absence of a right to residency for recognized stateless individuals weakens the protective value of the SDP. For those undocumented, the procedure may highlight their vulnerability without addressing the core issue of legal inclusion (Eurydice, 2025). This paradox underscores the need for a more holistic framework that not only identifies statelessness but also provides pathways to protection and participation in society.

This comparative [Table 3](#) synthesizes key similarities and differences between Greece and the Netherlands regarding international conventions ratified, functioning of Statelessness Determination Procedures, legal recognition mechanisms, protection outcomes, naturalization benefits, birth registration safeguards, and data collection systems. The table illustrates that while the Netherlands has made more substantial progress in establishing formal procedures, both countries face significant gaps in providing meaningful protection and inclusion for stateless individuals.

Across both countries, the recurring theme is that stateless people must continuously fight for rights that others receive automatically. Education, work, legal recognition, and even daily security are shaped by bureaucratic systems that often do not account for the realities of statelessness. Yet the stories also reveal remarkable resilience, hope, and determination to build a meaningful life despite these barriers.

Table 3

Key similarities and differences

Aspect	Greece	Netherlands
International Conventions	Ratified 1954 Convention; not 1961 or ECN	Ratified both 1954 and 1961 Conventions; ECN ratified
Statelessness Determination	No functioning SDP; legal provision exists but not implemented	Functioning SDP introduced in 2023 through Statelessness Determination Act
Legal Recognition	Statelessness not formally recognized via dedicated procedure	Statelessness can be formally recognized and registered in the BRP
Protection Outcome	No formal status or protections provided upon recognition	Recognition does not grant legal stay but enables access to documentation
Naturalization	Reduced residence period and fees for stateless individuals	Similar benefits apply; more accessible after legal recognition
Birth Registration Safeguards	Exists in law; digital registration helps undocumented births	Similar benefits apply; more accessible after legal recognition
Data Collection	Fragmented, unreliable, no central recording system for stateless status	Structured recording in the BRP; clearer statistical overview

Educational access and inclusion

Educational access for stateless individuals in Greece

Greece has taken legislative steps to ensure that all children, irrespective of their legal status or nationality, can access public education. The Greek Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, guided by national and international legal commitments, formally guarantees the right to education for all minors, including stateless children (Eurydice, 2025). Access to compulsory schooling, which spans pre-primary to lower secondary education (ages 5 to 15), is granted on equal terms with Greek citizens.

A significant stride has been the introduction of a digital birth registration system in 2020 (ECRE 2024 update). This development aims to address one of the primary barriers to school enrollment: lack of documentation. Children born to undocumented parents, including many who are stateless, can now be assigned temporary identity numbers, enabling their participation in early childhood education programs.

Beyond early education, stateless children are entitled to attend both general and vocational secondary education. Greece also offers support programs, such as Reception Classes and Educational Priority Zones (ZEP), designed to facilitate the integration of non-Greek-speaking students. Moreover, intercultural schools promote inclusivity through specialized curricula and teacher training in intercultural education (Palaologou & Evaggelou, 2012). Opportunities continue at the tertiary level, where stateless students who complete secondary school in Greece may compete for university places under the same criteria as Greek nationals. Adult education is also accessible through programs such as Second Chance Schools and Lifelong Learning Centers.

Despite these advances, significant obstacles persist. Inconsistent implementation of enrollment procedures across municipalities, bureaucratic complexities, and language or documentation requirements often hinder school access for stateless children. While Greek law technically allows school enrollment without a birth certificate, other prerequisites, such as vaccination records or proof of residence, can be exclusionary in practice. Marginalized communities, such as the Roma or refugees lacking diplomatic representation, are especially vulnerable to these systemic shortcomings.

Structural inequalities further deepen exclusion. Many stateless children live in precarious housing or transit facilities where school attendance is disrupted by frequent relocations, lack of transport, or limited school capacity. The limited availability of reception classes—only established if seven (7) eligible students enroll within a given timeframe—exacerbates educational marginalization (Skourtou, et al., 2020). In secondary and higher education, the recognition of foreign diplomas and qualifications remains an arduous process, disproportionately affecting stateless youth who cannot furnish official records due to their legal invisibility.

Educational inclusion in the Netherlands

In contrast to Greece's centralized public system, the Netherlands supports educational inclusion through a combination of government policy and civil society initiatives. While there are no education-specific policies that explicitly target stateless individuals, many programs designed for refugees and asylum seekers are de facto accessible to stateless persons, particularly those with lawful residence (UNHCR, 2023).

Key organizations such as UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students) provide comprehensive educational and professional support to displaced individuals, including stateless people. This includes guidance on academic pathways, language instruction, scholarships, and career planning. UAF's individualized support model reflects a broader ethos of inclusion, linking students to networks of educational institutions and employers.

Educational access is further facilitated through initiatives like Nuffic's "Study in Holland" platform, which demystifies the Dutch education system and provides accessible guidance on studying at vocational, university, or applied sciences levels (Nuffic, 2025). While not tailored exclusively for stateless individuals, such resources create crucial entry points for navigating educational opportunities.

University-based programs also play an important role. For example, Inclusion at Utrecht University allows stateless and displaced individuals to attend undergraduate courses free of charge without formal enrollment, offering an academic lifeline for those seeking intellectual engagement or continued learning. Similarly, Wageningen University's "WURth-while" program provides access to bachelor's and master's level coursework in English and Dutch across a variety of scientific disciplines, further fostering academic inclusion.

Unlike in Greece, where legal frameworks provide theoretical access but implementation gaps remain wide, the Netherlands offers practical support mechanisms that, while not always codified in law, enable many stateless individuals to pursue education at different levels. However, a notable limitation in the Dutch context is the distinction between recognized stateless persons and those categorized as having "unknown nationality." Without legal residence status, the latter group remains excluded from formal educational pathways and long-term support (UNHCR, 2023).

Points of convergence and divergence

Both Greece and the Netherlands demonstrate a commitment to providing education to stateless individuals, but they do so through different channels. Greece's approach is more rooted in legal guarantees and public sector frameworks, though its implementation suffers from inconsistency and administrative hurdles. The Netherlands, meanwhile, lacks a comprehensive legal framework specific to stateless education access but compensates through targeted civil society initiatives and academic outreach that create functional inclusivity for many.

The key divergence lies in the practical accessibility of support systems. In Greece, procedural barriers, such as incomplete documentation, mobility issues, and local bureaucratic discretion, prevent many from fully realizing their rights. In the Netherlands, although inclusion efforts are more flexible and individualized, they often depend on the legal status of the person, leaving undocumented stateless individuals in a grey zone with limited educational options.

Best practices, gaps, and opportunities for reform

Despite shared commitments to international conventions, Greece and the Netherlands take distinctly different approaches to statelessness determination and protection. Both countries have made legal strides on paper, but practical realities expose a range of inconsistencies, institutional barriers, and implementation shortfalls that continue to affect stateless individuals living within their borders.

Legal and procedural gaps

In Greece, the absence of an operational Statelessness Determination Procedure (SDP) remains the most significant barrier to addressing the issue effectively. Although the legal basis for such a mechanism exists under Law 4939/2019, no Presidential Decree has been issued to put it into action (ENS, 2024b). This leaves stateless individuals without an official avenue to obtain recognition or legal status, despite the country's ratification of the Convention. Instead, statelessness is occasionally identified incidentally during asylum or immigration processes, but these pathways do not confer any formal status or rights related specifically to statelessness. Without legal recognition, individuals are effectively stuck in limbo, unable to access permanent residence, naturalization, or critical public services.

Conversely, the Netherlands has implemented a more structured legal pathway for individuals to be recognized as stateless (ENS, 2024b). The establishment of an official SDP offers a procedural route for registration, albeit with its own shortcomings. While stateless individuals can benefit from reduced naturalization requirements, such as being eligible for citizenship after three (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2014) years, the status does not automatically grant residence rights or unrestricted access to public services. Furthermore, many individuals remain listed under "unknown nationality," complicating their legal standing and obstructing access to essential opportunities such as employment, banking, or travel.

Best practices and positive developments

Despite institutional challenges, Greece has demonstrated some progressive practices, particularly regarding the integration of stateless children into society. Legal provisions allow children born in Greece who would otherwise be stateless to apply for citizenship, and a notable percentage of naturalization cases have been approved in recent years. Additionally, the country has made efforts to improve data collection through collaboration with European agencies like Frontex, which supports nationality determination and documentation during border processes (Frontex, 2025).

In the Netherlands, several initiatives stand out as promising practices. The formalization of an SDP, though limited in scope, represents a crucial legal foundation (ENS, 2024). More importantly, the Dutch ecosystem includes a stronger network of support organizations and educational initiatives. For instance, NGOs like UAF and university-led programs such as Inclusion offer pathways for stateless individuals to pursue higher education, acquire language skills, and prepare for employment, even while awaiting legal resolution. These efforts create a more enabling environment for stateless individuals to rebuild their lives.

Institutional and social barriers

In both countries, stateless individuals face widespread bureaucratic difficulties and a lack of consistent institutional support. In Greece, fragmented responsibilities between different state agencies result in uncoordinated actions and no uniform system for tracking or identifying stateless persons. The term "stateless" is often conflated with vague classifications like "unknown nationality," making data unreliable and impeding targeted policymaking.

Furthermore, stateless persons are at risk of lengthy administrative detention without clear criteria for removal or thorough vulnerability assessments, practices that run contrary to international human rights norms (Global Detention Project, 2023).

Although the Netherlands has a more coherent administrative structure, it also exhibits notable deficiencies. Stateless individuals may be officially recognized, but they frequently remain excluded from basic rights due to their lack of residence status. Many find themselves in a grey zone—recognized but not fully included. This leads to emotional distress and practical barriers, such as difficulty in opening bank accounts or enrolling in social programs. Interviews with affected individuals reveal a recurring theme of systemic invisibility, frustration with slow and opaque procedures, and feelings of being trapped in an endless cycle of documentation and delays (ASKV, 2025).

Opportunities for reform

Both Greece and the Netherlands have considerable room for reform, though their starting points differ.

For Greece, a top priority is the immediate establishment of a functional SDP, supported by clear regulations and interagency coordination. Simplifying procedures for naturalization, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and investing in comprehensive data systems would also strengthen the country's response to statelessness. As one participant (M3) emphasized: "More support for documentation" is critically needed. Furthermore, offering legal aid, multilingual services, and community outreach could empower individuals to assert their rights. Another participant (M2) stated: "I would ask them to recognize us as equal people. I'd change the rules so we can work, study and travel. Create faster ways to legal status."

In the Netherlands, the focus should be on bridging the gap between recognition and inclusion. While the legal infrastructure is more developed, reforms should ensure that recognized stateless individuals can secure residence rights and access key services. Efforts to reduce reliance on the "unknown nationality" classification and increase transparency in the determination process would enhance fairness. As participant M4 articulated: "I would ask them to simplify and make the process faster for recognizing statelessness. Governments should create easier ways for stateless people to become legal citizens. We need access to work, education, and travel, just like anyone else." Expanding partnerships with civil society organizations to deliver practical support can also amplify the effectiveness of existing programs.

The 2024 European Pact on Migration and Asylum provides a framework for enhanced cooperation among member states, calling for harmonized approaches to protection, streamlined procedures, and stronger safeguards for vulnerable populations including stateless persons. Both Greece and the Netherlands should align their national policies with these European commitments, ensuring that stateless individuals receive not only recognition but meaningful pathways to integration and belonging (EU Action Plan 2021-2027).

CONCLUSIONS

Statelessness represents one of the most profound violations of human dignity in contemporary Europe, affecting hundreds of thousands of individuals who exist in legal limbo—unable to work, study, travel, or fully

participate in society. This study has examined the lived experiences of eight (8) stateless individuals in Greece and the Netherlands, revealing the stark gap between international legal commitments and practical implementation. While both countries have ratified key conventions and established legal frameworks, stateless persons continue to face severe barriers to education, employment, legal recognition, and social inclusion.

Statelessness is closely linked to the necessity of language education, as the absence of citizenship often places stateless persons in situations of prolonged social and institutional exclusion. Without adequate language skills, stateless individuals face additional barriers in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and public services within the host country. Language education therefore becomes not only a tool for communication, but also a fundamental mechanism for social inclusion, autonomy, and participation in society. In many cases, the inability to speak the host country's language reinforces existing legal and bureaucratic obstacles, further limiting opportunities for integration and self-sufficiency. Consequently, access to effective language education should be considered an essential component of integration policies targeting stateless populations.

These findings demonstrate that children generally experience better access to education than adults, yet even their educational journeys are marked by bureaucratic obstacles, documentation requirements, and institutional hesitations. Adult stateless individuals face even greater exclusion, often unable to complete their education, access vocational training, or have their professional qualifications recognized. The inability to work legally forces many into precarious informal employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization across generations. Beyond material hardship, statelessness inflicts profound psychological and emotional costs—participants described feelings of invisibility, frustration, and a perpetual sense of being trapped in administrative limbo.

The comparative analysis reveals distinct approaches between Greece and the Netherlands, each with strengths and limitations. Greece's legal framework provides theoretical access to education and pathways to naturalization, but the absence of a functioning Statelessness Determination Procedure leaves individuals without formal recognition or protection. Administrative fragmentation, inconsistent implementation, and inadequate support systems create formidable barriers. The Netherlands has made more substantial progress by establishing an SDP in 2023 and fostering stronger civil society support networks. However, recognition without residence rights creates a paradox—individuals are acknowledged as stateless yet remain excluded from meaningful inclusion in society.

Both countries exemplify the broader European challenge: bridging the gap between legal recognition and practical protection. Effective responses to statelessness require not only formal procedures and documentation systems but also comprehensive support mechanisms including legal aid, cross-cultural training for officials, language services, educational access, employment pathways, and community integration programs. The voices of participants in this study make clear that stateless individuals do not lack motivation, skills, or aspirations—they lack the legal identity and institutional support that would enable them to contribute fully to society.

Addressing statelessness demands urgent action at both national and European levels. Greece must establish a functioning SDP, strengthen birth registration systems, improve interagency coordination, and provide targeted support for vulnerable communities. The Netherlands should ensure that stateless recognition translates into residence rights and access to services, eliminate the ambiguous "unknown nationality" classification, and expand support for undocumented stateless persons. At the European level, the 2024 European Pact on Migration and Asylum provides a framework for harmonized policies, enhanced cooperation, and strengthened protection mechanisms that must be translated into concrete action.

Ultimately, resolving statelessness is not merely a legal or administrative challenge—it is a moral imperative. Every individual has the fundamental human right to a nationality, to legal identity, and to belong. As our participants' testimonies reveal, stateless persons demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination despite facing systemic barriers. Their stories remind us that behind every statistic is a human being seeking recognition, dignity, and the opportunity to build a meaningful life. The international community, European institutions, and national governments must honor their commitments by transforming legal frameworks into lived realities, ensuring that no one remains invisible, excluded, or forgotten in the margins of society.

Proposals for further research

This comparative study has highlighted significant gaps, challenges, and best practices in the treatment of stateless individuals in Greece and the Netherlands, particularly with respect to access to education and fundamental rights. However, several areas remain underexplored and merit further investigation to build a more comprehensive understanding of statelessness in Europe and beyond.

First, future research should broaden its geographic scope to include additional EU member states and neighboring countries. While Greece and the Netherlands offer contrasting examples in terms of legal and institutional frameworks, analyzing other national contexts, such as Germany, Sweden, or Bulgaria, could enrich

the comparative landscape and identify regional trends, shared challenges, or innovative solutions in addressing statelessness.

Second, there is a pressing need for in-depth studies that track the experiences of stateless individuals over time. Such research could offer valuable insights into how legal reforms, residency policies, and educational access evolve, and whether they result in meaningful improvements in the lives of stateless people. Extensive approaches would also capture the emotional and psychological dimensions of statelessness, which are often overlooked in policy-driven research.

Third, future studies should consider the intersectionality of statelessness with other forms of marginalization, such as gender, disability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Understanding how these factors interact can help create more targeted and inclusive policy interventions. For instance, the experiences of stateless women or children with disabilities may differ significantly from those of other groups and require specific support measures.

Additionally, more research is needed on the role of non-state actors, such as NGOs, local communities, schools, and civil society organizations, in filling the gaps left by state institutions. Their contributions to supporting stateless individuals, especially in education and social integration, are crucial and often not sufficiently documented.

Finally, there is a need for more data-driven research. The lack of consistent and disaggregated data on stateless populations continues to obscure the scale of the issue. Future research could work in partnership with government agencies, the UNHCR, and national statistical offices to develop better methodologies for identifying, recording, and tracking stateless populations, an essential step for evidence-based policymaking.

In conclusion, while this study has offered a comparative analysis between Greece and the Netherlands, future research should aim to expand the scope, deepen the methodology, and diversify the voices and contexts included. Doing so will strengthen academic understanding, inform international policy, and ultimately contribute to a more just and inclusive framework for the recognition and protection of stateless individuals.

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Ethical statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Hellenic Open University (approval code: [INSERT CODE dissertation number 066887]; date of approval: 18/7/2025).

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, M.G., M.E., and N.P.; methodology, M.G. and M.E.; formal analysis, M.G. and M.E.; investigation, M.G. and M.E.; resources, N.P.; data curation, M.G. and M.E.; writing—original draft preparation, M.G. and M.E.; writing—review and editing, M.G., M.E., and N.P.; supervision, M.E. and N.P.; project administration, N.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations regarding the protection of stateless participants' identities.

AI disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (Version 4.0) to assist with editing and refining the APA references of the manuscript. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed, edited, and

verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and scientific integrity of this publication.

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