

Thesis abstract

Experiences of statelessness and refugee protection: Exploring the “Rohingya Life” in Sydney, Australia

Zoe Louise Bell

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture, UNSW Sydney

The Australian government has two systems for refugee arrivals. One is the official refugee resettlement system, a coordinated approach between Australia and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and the other is the government’s response to informal or irregular arrivals of people seeking asylum, particularly those arriving by boat. Over the past 20 years, people who arrive informally have been placed in immigration detention, deported, or given temporary forms of refugee protection. Within this system some people are stateless, with no country to return to and no citizenship or nationality to protect them. Within the existing body of knowledge relating to statelessness, there is limited literature relating to the lived experience of statelessness and the experience of the stateless refugee in democratic countries that adhere to international human rights norms. Furthermore, there is only limited research on the Rohingya, a well-known stateless refugee community, in contexts outside of Myanmar and Bangladesh. To address these knowledge gaps, the research described in this thesis draws on the lived experiences of the stateless Rohingya refugees in Sydney, Australia, to explore the intersection of statelessness and temporary forms of refugee protection. More specifically, this thesis focuses on four areas of

research: 1) Developing an understanding of statelessness from the perspective of the Rohingya, how statelessness changes in different contexts, and how statelessness affects individuals, families, and groups; 2) Investigating the ways in which temporary forms of refugee protection create barriers to building a new life in accordance with a human-rights approach. Comparison is made between temporary and permanent settlement experiences; 3) Examining the intersection of statelessness and prolonged temporariness and analysing their impact on the Rohingya; 4) Exploring the ways in which notions of belonging and community are created within the context of prolonged temporariness and persistent statelessness.

Methodologies described in this thesis include phenomenology and anti-oppressive social work methodologies combined with participatory action research methods. Using this combined approach, members of the Rohingya community in Sydney engaged with this research in discussion through a collaborative partnership. Representatives from the Rohingya community were involved in developing the focus and design of the research project, as well as coordinating and co-facilitating of the fieldwork. A total of 63 participants from the Rohingya community shared aspects of their lived experiences through in-depth inter-

views and focus groups meetings between November 2020 and December 2021.

The key finding of this research is that statelessness dominates and dictates all aspects of life and inevitably permeates a person's sense of identity and self-worth, their choices, and perspectives. From a human-rights perspective, statelessness manifests as a form of internalised oppression, described by research participants as "Rohingya Life." This research also found that prolonged temporariness places people in a transitional or "liminal" state, which, combined with structural barriers, affects their interaction with time and mental health and challenges their sense of belonging. A key contribution of this research is the development of a new conceptual model that provides a structural analysis of statelessness and prolonged temporariness at the micro (personal), meso (community) and macro (structural) levels of society. The proposed model contributes to a better understanding of how statelessness intersects with Australia's temporary refugee protection system and enhances understanding of the lived experience of statelessness.

Dr Zoe Bell
Sessional Academic, University of New
South Wales Sydney

E-mail: z.bell@unsw.edu.au

URL: <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/entities/publication/1d55d3b6-5866-459b-86f9-10afa8002f19>