

Understanding ‘Agency’ of Stateless Persons in Framing Their Resilience: States vs. the Global Protection Mechanism for Stateless Rohingyas

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The protracted displacement of over one million stateless Rohingyas has posed critical challenges to both host states and the global refugee protection regime. While international actors increasingly promote resilience as a strategy for managing refugee populations—emphasizing self-reliance and adaptation—this policy brief questions whether such frameworks genuinely empower Rohingyas or merely accommodate statelessness. It argues that agency—the capacity of stateless persons to make decisions and influence their conditions—is fundamental to understanding and evaluating resilience strategies. Drawing on empirical evidence from Bangladesh and other host countries, this study examines how Rohingya refugees negotiate livelihood opportunities, govern camp life, and mobilize transnational advocacy networks, thereby demonstrating agency despite legal and institutional marginalization.

This policy brief investigates the dialectical relationship between agency and resilience: does agency drive resilience, or does resilience enhance agency? It contends that although resilience programs often aim to strengthen agency through skills training or community participation, they risk instrumentalizing Rohingyas as “resilient subjects” while leaving structural injustices—such as statelessness—unaddressed. Using a critical refugee studies lens, the brief analyzes how state-centric and humanitarian discourses on resilience may obscure demands for legal recognition and political rights.

The research employs qualitative methods—such as policy document analysis, interviews, and ethnographic insights from Rohingya camps—to critically assess whether global and national protection mechanisms enhance or limit the agency of stateless populations. By foregrounding the lived experiences and perspectives of Rohingyas, the study evaluates how humanitarian interventions either support or suppress autonomous decision-making and whether current resilience programs serve as pathways to empowerment or instruments of containment. It also interrogates the gaps in international legal frameworks—especially the failure of South Asian states to ratify key conventions on statelessness—that leave Rohingyas in a perpetual legal and existential limbo.

This policy brief contributes to broader discourses on justice and security by situating the Rohingya predicament within the politics of exclusion and structural marginalization. It challenges security frameworks that reduce Rohingyas to risks or burdens, instead advocating for their recognition as political subjects with rights and agency. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of justice-oriented approaches that extend beyond humanitarian relief to ensure legal recognition, citizenship, and dignity. By framing resilience not as a substitute for rights but as a product of agency, this research calls for a reimagining of protection strategies—anchored in justice, informed by local agency, and accountable to the long-term security of vulnerable populations.