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Barriers to Political Participation Among Stateless Communities: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted barriers to political participation experienced by stateless individuals residing in Tehran, Iran. Using a qualitative research design, this study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 stateless participants selected through purposive sampling. The interviews focused on participants' lived experiences with civic exclusion and perceptions of political engagement. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, including open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurrent patterns across participant narratives. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing. Analysis revealed four major themes: legal and administrative barriers, socioeconomic constraints, psychological and cultural inhibitions, and institutional and structural exclusion. Subthemes included lack of documentation, ineligibility for voting, poverty, educational deprivation, political disillusionment, internalized stigma, and absence of representation. Participants consistently reported systemic neglect, fear of state surveillance, and feelings of invisibility in public discourse. These barriers interacted in complex ways, compounding exclusion and limiting not only formal political engagement but also informal civic expression. Quotes from interviews highlighted a pervasive sense of helplessness and resignation among participants, underpinned by decades of bureaucratic marginalization and social discrimination. Stateless individuals in Tehran face intersecting legal, social, psychological, and institutional obstacles that severely restrict their political participation. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-pronged strategy involving legal reform, inclusive public policy, civic education, and active engagement by civil society. Political inclusion should be treated as a fundamental right, not a privilege, to ensure the democratic representation of all residents regardless of legal status.

Keywords: *Statelessness; Political Participation; Civic Exclusion; Qualitative Research; Iran; Human Rights; Disenfranchisement.*

Introduction

Political participation is a cornerstone of democratic governance, providing individuals with the means to influence political processes, access public resources, and assert their rights (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). However, this fundamental right remains inaccessible to millions of people globally who live in conditions of statelessness. Stateless individuals—those not considered as nationals by any state under the operation of its laws—are systematically excluded from civic and political life (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023). Despite being physically present within a state's territory, stateless persons often face



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insurmountable barriers to exercising political agency, including voting, standing for office, joining political parties, or even voicing their needs in policy dialogues (Blitz & Lynch, 2011). As such, understanding the barriers to political participation faced by stateless communities is critical for ensuring inclusive governance and upholding international human rights norms.

Globally, there are an estimated 4.4 million stateless individuals reported across 95 countries, though the actual number is believed to be much higher due to underreporting and political sensitivity (UNHCR, 2023). The reasons for statelessness are complex and context-dependent, often linked to colonial legacies, discriminatory nationality laws, migration, displacement, and gaps in civil registration systems (Manby, 2016). Regardless of the cause, the consequences of statelessness are profound. Stateless individuals are frequently denied access to education, healthcare, employment, property rights, and, notably, political rights (Open Society Foundations, 2018). This political exclusion is not only a manifestation of their legal invisibility but also a driver of intergenerational marginalization, disenfranchisement, and systemic inequality (Bhabha, 2009).

Political participation is not a monolithic concept; it encompasses a wide range of activities through which individuals express political preferences and engage with public institutions. These include formal mechanisms such as voting and running for office, as well as informal avenues like attending protests, engaging in civic dialogue, or mobilizing through community groups (Dalton, 2008). For stateless persons, barriers to participation are both structural and symbolic. Structurally, they lack legal status, national identification documents, or official recognition, which precludes them from participating in elections or registering for civic platforms (Swider, 2019). Symbolically, stateless communities often internalize political disillusionment and alienation, having experienced decades of exclusion, discrimination, and neglect by political elites (Hovil, 2016). These psychological and cultural factors compound the legal and institutional barriers, further diminishing their sense of political efficacy.

The exclusion of stateless communities from political processes poses serious ethical and policy challenges. From a normative standpoint, the denial of political rights undermines principles enshrined in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 21) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 25), which affirm that everyone has the right to take part in public affairs (United Nations, 1948; 1966). Moreover, the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons calls for the protection of fundamental rights irrespective of nationality status, yet political rights remain among the least protected dimensions of stateless persons' lives (van Waas, 2014). The denial of participation also has practical ramifications: stateless individuals are excluded from public decision-making, leaving their communities underrepresented, underserved, and politically voiceless.

Despite its significance, the issue of political participation among stateless populations remains underexplored in the academic literature. Much of the existing research has focused on legal status, access to education, and health outcomes (Blitz, 2017; Manby, 2016), while civic engagement and political behavior remain relatively understudied. There is a pressing need to understand how stateless persons experience exclusion from political life—not only through the lens of legal documentation but also through their social positioning, lived experiences, and perceptions of political institutions. Moreover, the diversity of stateless communities demands a context-specific understanding. In Iran, for instance, various groups including undocumented migrants, children of mixed-nationality parents, and certain ethnic minorities face conditions akin to statelessness, often without formal recognition or protection (Bahrami & Shahbazi, 2020). These individuals are typically absent from national databases, unable to obtain national ID cards, and thus excluded from political participation.

Tehran, as the capital and largest urban center in Iran, hosts a considerable number of individuals who live in de facto stateless conditions. These individuals navigate a complex web of legal ambiguity, institutional neglect, and social marginalization, all of which reinforce their political invisibility. While informal community organizing and cultural forms of resistance exist, formal political participation—voting, candidacy, policy dialogue—remains elusive. Yet, within academic, legal, and policy discourses in Iran, there is a lack of empirical data and qualitative insight into how these communities perceive and experience political exclusion. This gap is particularly significant given the government's recent emphasis on national identity, civic cohesion, and digital governance—all of which rely on documentation and recognition as a prerequisite for participation.

In response to this gap, the present study seeks to explore the multifaceted barriers that prevent stateless communities in Tehran from engaging in political life. Using a qualitative research design, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with 16 stateless individuals to investigate how legal, institutional, socioeconomic, and psychological factors shape their political exclusion. The research adopts a thematic approach to identify core patterns and lived experiences related to disenfranchisement. By centering the voices of stateless individuals, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of exclusion, challenge dominant legalistic narratives, and offer insights for policy interventions that promote inclusive political participation.

The significance of this research lies not only in its empirical contribution but also in its potential to inform more equitable political systems. As scholars have noted, inclusion must extend beyond legal reforms to address the cultural, institutional, and affective dimensions of belonging and participation (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). Political engagement must be redefined in ways that acknowledge the agency of marginalized communities and confront the social logics of exclusion embedded in bureaucratic and civic infrastructures. This study offers a step in that direction by highlighting the voices, strategies, and structural constraints faced by those living at the margins of political visibility. The findings can help policymakers, civil society organizations, and international bodies develop more inclusive frameworks for recognizing and integrating stateless communities into the public sphere.

In sum, while political participation is commonly regarded as a universal right, its realization is deeply stratified by legal status, institutional access, and social power. Stateless communities exemplify the paradox of presence without recognition—of being visible in the demographic sense yet invisible in political terms. Through an in-depth qualitative inquiry, this study interrogates the conditions that produce and sustain political nonexistence among stateless persons in Tehran. It seeks not only to document exclusion but to make visible the voices of those who have long been silenced by the structures of statelessness.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the barriers to political participation experienced by stateless communities. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the emphasis on capturing the lived experiences and subjective realities of marginalized individuals. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objective. Inclusion criteria included individuals aged 18 and above, self-identifying as stateless or lacking formal citizenship status, and residing in Tehran. Efforts were made to ensure variation in age, gender, and ethnic background to capture diverse perspectives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in a final sample of 16 participants. Theoretical saturation was operationalized as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged during successive interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face in locations that were comfortable and secure for participants. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' political awareness, engagement experiences, perceived barriers, and interactions with governmental or civic institutions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Prior to each session, informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version XX). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initial open coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis to identify significant statements and meanings. Codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, and central themes were distilled via selective coding. NVivo facilitated systematic data organization, code frequency analysis, and the visualization of thematic patterns across cases. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, and analytical memos were used to track the evolution of codes and emergent insights. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking with selected participants and peer debriefing sessions with qualitative research experts.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Legal and Administrative Barriers

Lack of Official Identification

Participants frequently reported that the absence of essential identity documents—such as national ID cards, birth certificates, or passports—prevents them from registering to vote or accessing political platforms. One respondent stated, “I’ve lived here all my life, but I don’t have anything to prove it. Without a birth certificate, they say I don’t even exist.”

Ineligibility for Voting

Several interviewees shared that they were ineligible to participate in elections, as their names were missing from the electoral registry or not recognized by civil authorities. As one participant described, “I went to vote once, but they told me I’m not on the list. They didn’t even let me explain.”

Complex Bureaucratic Procedures

Participants emphasized the overwhelming complexity of the bureaucratic system, which requires extensive documentation, time, and knowledge that many stateless individuals do not possess. “They keep sending me from one office to another,” said one interviewee. “Everywhere I go, they want documents I don’t have.”

Arbitrary Law Enforcement

Fear of police harassment, arbitrary detention, or deportation discouraged many from engaging in any political activity. One young man shared, “I was once taken by police for not having an ID. Now I avoid anything that might attract attention, even if it’s peaceful protest.”

Statelessness Recognition Gaps

The lack of formal recognition for stateless individuals was a recurrent theme. Participants expressed frustration that there is no official status or protection for them. “They don’t even have a name for people like us. If I’m not Iranian, then what am I?” questioned one respondent.

Lack of Legal Representation

A number of participants noted that they could not afford legal counsel and did not understand how to navigate the legal system. As one individual put it, “I don’t know any lawyers, and even if I did, what would I pay them with? They use words I don’t understand.”

Theme 2: Socioeconomic Constraints

Poverty and Economic Hardship

Living in conditions of chronic poverty, many participants prioritized basic survival over political engagement. “Politics doesn’t put food on my table. I need to work every day to feed my family,” said a middle-aged respondent.

Limited Access to Education

Participants shared how the lack of formal education, especially civic education, hindered their ability to understand political systems or participate effectively. One participant noted, “I never went to school. No one ever taught me what voting is or how to do it.”

Informal Housing and Marginalization

Many lived in informal settlements or unregistered homes, which further excluded them from government documentation and official processes. “I have no official address. They say they can’t send me anything or register me,” a participant explained.

Language and Literacy Barriers

Several individuals cited difficulty understanding official language and political materials. “I can’t read well in Persian, and most forms are too complicated,” shared one woman, emphasizing how literacy challenges directly limit political engagement.

Discrimination in Services

Experiences of systemic discrimination in public services and government offices were common. One participant explained, “They always treat me differently at the office. They know I’m not from here, and they don’t hide it.”

Theme 3: Psychological and Cultural Inhibitions

Political Disillusionment

Disillusionment with the political system was prominent. Many believed that political participation does not yield any change for people in their situation. “We’ve been ignored for decades. Why should I believe voting will help now?” said one elder participant.

Fear of Reprisal

Some participants feared that even peaceful political activity might attract unwanted attention from authorities or threats to their families. One young woman expressed, “I always think, what if I get arrested or my brother is targeted because I spoke up?”

Cultural Norms and Expectations

Certain community norms discouraged political participation, especially for women. “In our family, politics is for men. I was always told to stay out of these things,” shared a female participant.

Lack of Awareness of Political Rights

Most participants were unaware of their potential rights under international law or local policy. “No one ever told me I had a right to vote or protest. I thought these things were for citizens only,” one interviewee said.

Internalized Stigma

A profound sense of inferiority and shame stemming from statelessness was reported. As one participant explained, “I don’t feel like I belong. Why would anyone care what someone like me thinks?”

Low Civic Efficacy

A recurring belief was that individual action would not lead to change. “Even if I vote, what difference would it make? People like me don’t matter,” one respondent stated with resignation.

Isolation from Mainstream Society

The lack of inclusion in national media and public discourse further contributed to feelings of exclusion. “We don’t see our people on TV, in the news, or in debates. It’s like we don’t exist,” one participant observed.

Theme 4: Institutional and Structural Exclusion

Exclusion from Political Institutions

Participants were often barred from joining political parties or participating in civic forums. “I tried to join a political youth group, but they said I needed to be a citizen,” said one young man.

Lack of Representation

The absence of stateless representatives in government was a key concern. “We have no one who speaks for us in parliament. That’s why our issues are ignored,” emphasized a middle-aged participant.

Ignored by Policy Makers

Several participants noted that their petitions or complaints to local authorities went unanswered. “I’ve written letters, but no one ever replies,” said a woman who had lived in Tehran for over 20 years.

Manipulation by Political Actors

Some felt they were used as symbolic figures during political campaigns but later abandoned. “They come to our neighborhood before elections, take pictures with us, and then disappear,” shared one man bitterly.

Lack of Civil Society Engagement

Participants criticized NGOs and civil society organizations for failing to include or support stateless individuals meaningfully. “I see NGOs working everywhere, but they never come to us,” noted one respondent.

Disenfranchisement Through Policy

Restrictive nationality and residency laws were often cited as legal mechanisms that institutionalize exclusion. “Even if I was born here, the law doesn’t accept me. It keeps me outside,” said a 30-year-old stateless man.

Media Neglect

Finally, the lack of representation in media was a recurring theme. Participants believed that their stories were systematically erased or misrepresented. “The media only talks about us when something bad happens. They don’t tell our real stories,” lamented one participant.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the barriers to political participation among stateless individuals in Tehran through a qualitative inquiry involving semi-structured interviews with 16 participants. The findings revealed a complex interplay of legal, administrative, socioeconomic, psychological, cultural, and institutional barriers that inhibit political engagement among this marginalized population. These barriers were grouped into four overarching themes: legal and administrative obstacles, socioeconomic constraints, psychological and cultural inhibitions, and institutional and structural exclusion. Each theme comprised multiple subcategories that reflected the depth of the exclusion experienced by stateless persons. These results not only corroborate existing global research on statelessness and

political disenfranchisement but also extend the conversation by contextualizing these experiences in the sociopolitical environment of Iran.

The first and most consistent theme across participants was the legal and administrative exclusion stemming from the lack of official documentation. The absence of identification documents such as birth certificates, national ID cards, or passports effectively blocks access to voter registration, civil service, and even basic interactions with state institutions. These findings align with global patterns, where lack of documentation is a primary determinant of stateless individuals' inability to participate politically (van Waas, 2014). The Iranian civil registry system, which heavily conditions legal identity on paternal citizenship, exacerbates the problem for children born to non-Iranian fathers or undocumented migrants (Bahrami & Shahbazi, 2020). These bureaucratic gaps are not merely technical in nature—they function as exclusionary political tools that render stateless persons invisible in public policy and unaccounted for in electoral processes (Blitz & Lynch, 2011). Several participants also highlighted the fear of arbitrary law enforcement, a finding echoed in Swider's (2019) research on surveillance and repression of undocumented populations. The threat of detention or deportation discourages even informal political involvement, such as attending protests or signing petitions, and reinforces a logic of silence and invisibility.

The socioeconomic constraints identified in this study further compound political exclusion. Participants frequently noted that poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education deprive them of the time, resources, and civic knowledge necessary for engagement. These findings are consistent with Dalton's (2008) work, which suggests that lower socioeconomic status correlates with lower political participation due to reduced access to information, time constraints, and diminished civic confidence. For stateless individuals, these economic hardships are not coincidental but structurally imposed through exclusion from formal employment, public services, and education systems (Open Society Foundations, 2018). Notably, participants in this study linked informal housing and geographic marginalization with their exclusion from the census and national development plans. This form of spatial exclusion mirrors research by Hovil (2016), who argued that political invisibility often starts with geographic and infrastructural neglect in urban planning and service delivery. Moreover, the language barriers and low literacy levels reported by participants reflect the additional weight of symbolic exclusion: not only are these individuals legally unrecognized, but they are also culturally and linguistically marginalized from public discourse.

The theme of psychological and cultural inhibitions revealed the emotional and cognitive dimensions of political exclusion. Many participants expressed political disillusionment, a sense of civic futility, and fear of reprisal for engaging with political institutions. These emotions were often tied to past experiences of betrayal, harassment, or neglect by state authorities. Similar affective responses are well-documented in stateless communities elsewhere, where years of exclusion produce what Bhabha (2009) terms "internalized political erasure." The belief that one's voice does not matter, or that political systems are inherently closed to outsiders, was particularly pronounced in this study. Several participants referenced cultural norms that discouraged political involvement, especially among women, reflecting broader patriarchal structures that intersect with legal and ethnic marginalization (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). Additionally, the theme of internalized stigma suggests that political disengagement is not only externally imposed but also internally reinforced. Individuals may see themselves as undeserving of participation, echoing Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma in the context of citizenship and legitimacy. This self-exclusion perpetuates cycles of marginalization and renders community organizing or advocacy efforts difficult to sustain.

The fourth and final theme—institutional and structural exclusion—underscored the systemic nature of political disenfranchisement. Participants repeatedly stated that they were barred from joining political parties, attending

civic forums, or receiving recognition from NGOs and civil society actors. These forms of institutional exclusion are symptomatic of a broader denial of political subjectivity to stateless persons. As Blitz (2017) has argued, political participation is often a privilege tied to formal citizenship rather than a universal right, despite international legal guarantees. The absence of political representation was particularly salient in this study. Participants felt that their communities were not only excluded from decision-making processes but were also invisible in national debates, media portrayals, and development agendas. This aligns with van Waas's (2014) critique of "policy blindness" regarding stateless populations and the lack of institutional mechanisms for their representation. Furthermore, the manipulation of stateless communities during political campaigns—as tokens or symbolic figures without actual empowerment—reflects Isin and Nielsen's (2008) conceptualization of "acts of citizenship" denied. In such settings, stateless individuals are called upon to legitimize political agendas but denied enduring agency or voice.

In summary, the findings of this study reinforce existing literature on the multifaceted nature of political exclusion among stateless communities. The results extend current understandings by offering an in-depth qualitative account from Tehran, an urban context where state-centric nationalism and bureaucratic formalism converge to perpetuate political invisibility. While the structural determinants of exclusion—legal status, documentation, institutional access—are well recognized, this study also reveals the emotional, spatial, and symbolic dimensions that compound and sustain disenfranchisement. Addressing these barriers will require more than legal reform; it demands a holistic reevaluation of the cultural, institutional, and discursive conditions under which political agency is recognized and exercised.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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