The Dream’s Door: Educational Marginalization of Rohingya Children in Malaysia

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Abstract
In Malaysia, refugees remain mostly invisible and face various challenges in terms of protection, healthcare and education. They are often preserved as ‘illegal immigrants’, therefore always at risk of arrest, detention, punishment and deportation. The worse sufferers of these are the children and youth, who are also considered to be illegitimate and deprived of rights including the right to education. This is a case study of a young Rohingya refugee man whose dedication and struggles, despite his problematic identity imposed by various authorities, continue to find a way out and serve fellow refugees through a community organization. However, the dream to have an education and flourish as a full-fledged human being remains a far cry for those marginalized, underprivileged Rohingya refugees and their children. Their experience in Malaysia is far from exceptional, of the sufferings that refugees are forced to bear in many countries in South and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, this case aims to facilitate the basic understanding of displacement, the refugee situation, international law and particularly refugee children’s rights to education. It provides a deeper understanding of the root causes of Rohingya’s current ‘stateless’ situation in Malaysia, identifies the challenges faced by a refugee community organization, refugee children’s struggles and rights to education. It initiates thoughts to examine the government policies and look for alternative strategies that may benefit the refugee children as well as the national development in the long run.

Disclaimer: This case is written for classroom discussion and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation, or to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making, or endorse the views of the management. The views and opinions expressed in this case are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of South Asian Journal of Business & Management Cases.

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**Dilemma:** Are Rohingya in Malaysia ‘refugees’ or ‘economic migrants’? Should the children of Rohingya be given access to education? Should Malaysia sign the 1951 Refugee Convention?

**Theory:** Statelessness theory

**Type of the Case:** Experience-based applied single case study

**Protagonist:** Present

**Options**

Malaysia can take the stand that being nonsignatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, it is not bound to come up with policies for refugees. By providing ‘temporary’ shelter to a significant number of refugees and asylum-seekers, Malaysia has done enough for the refugees. At the international level, Malaysia is considered to be sympathetic towards refugees. Refugee and asylum seekers’ presence has been exerting pressure on Malaysian culture and society.

In contrast, refugee and migration issues are receiving attention from the government and civil society in Malaysia. Former government has tried to adopt some policies like providing short-term work permit for a small number of registered Rohingya refugees in certain plantations and manufacturing sectors on an experimental basis to avoid social and economic risks posed by unemployed refugees. Malaysia should sign the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol because it is a member of the United Nations (UN) and party to many other major international human rights documents such as Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to name a few.

**Discussions and Case Questions**

What are the root causes of Rohingyas’ current statelessness situation and how should the Malaysian government tackle the issue? What are the challenges faced by Rohingya community organizations in integrating with the society? Should Malaysia look at improving the Rohingya children’s access to education or the community should take on the responsibility?

**Keywords**

Citizenship, education, Malaysia, Rohingya, refugee convention, stateless

**Introduction: In the Eyes of a Dreamer**

It is the New Year of 2019, and a beautiful dawn awakes. Sitting in his small office in a two-room shophouse,¹ Aung Thu Ali (pseudonym) stares at the glass window, deep in thought, wondering if this New Year would be any different than the previous, for himself, his family and his community. Ali sighs as his mind oscillates between uncertainties and hope. He is a Rohingya and belongs to a refugee community in Malaysia.

**Overview of Rohingya History in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, the migration and refugee life of the Rohingya diaspora began at least a couple of decades back. Deemed ‘stateless’ in their home country, Myanmar, Ali—like others in his community—risked
his life when they chose to cross the Myanmar border to start their life as refugees. Many came to
Malaysia through various risky paths by boat, or on foot, by crossing the border into Thailand and, from
there, into Malaysia. They came in waves, with the highest number of arrivals in the 1980s, 1990–1994,
2000–2004, 2012–2015, 2017, and they continue to come until today. Their reasons are connected to
their country of origin, Burma/Myanmar, and its oppressive policies towards the Rohingya ethnic
minority, resulting in political unrest and genocide in the Rakhine (previously known as Arakan) state of
Myanmar. In Myanmar, the Rohingya has been ‘stateless’ since 1982, when the government revoked
their citizenship through a constitutional change and the Burma Citizenship Law. This new law recognized
135 ethnic groups but rejected the ethnic Rohingya considering them as illegal immigrants. For the
Rohingya, this is more than a political issue; individually, and as a community, they face an identity
crisis. The ‘non-citizen’ status, together with the government’s numerous restrictive policies, has made
it difficult for them to continue living in Myanmar. Many sought ways to escape to countries in South
Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and beyond to save themselves and their families from violence
and persecution. In Malaysia, they continue to remain as ‘people without a state’, although they fulfil all
the criteria to be considered ‘refugees’. Malaysia has neither signed the 1951 Refugee Convention nor
its 1967 Protocol. Today, there are 84,030 stateless Rohingya registered with the United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and an estimated 30,000–40,000 more remain undocumented
(as of January 2019). Whether documented or undocumented, the refugees remain mostly invisible in
Malaysia and face various challenges in terms of protection, healthcare and education. They are often
treated as ‘illegal immigrants’; therefore, they are always at risk of arrest, detention, punishment and
deportation.

Ali’s Profile

While reflecting on the New Year morning of 2019, all those memories of Ali’s past came back so vividly
to him. He narrated that 6 years ago, he had come to Malaysia from Sittwe, the capital city of the Rakhine
state in Northern Myanmar. He was from an educated family. His father was a politician and activist in
Myanmar. Over the years, Ali had noticed that many Rohingya had moved to Sittwe because of the
government-imposed militarization in townships such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung and
restrictions over Rohingyas’ movement, education and work. But the situation was not any better in
Sittwe in terms of education and job opportunities for the youths, because of their Rohingya ethnicity.
Often, the Rohingya are denied access to schools established by the Rakhine community. Sometimes
they are even physically attacked for attending school. Many Rohingya had to hide their identity to gain
admission into university or to find jobs. Ali, whose first and middle names are Burmese in origin,
wanted to do something to educate the Rohingya who had relocated from other townships. He explained:

The Rakhine do not want the Rohingya people to be educated, because they think if the Rohingya can speak
English they will get jobs and will raise the Rohingya issue internationally.

Ali started an informal school in Sittwe to teach English to the Rohingya. He noted that the first 3
months, the military intelligence phoned him almost every day to question his motives. Then they asked
him to hand over his list of students. Ali refused, as he fears that doing so would result in the students
and their families being arrested. The Rakhine neighbours and the military threatened Ali. At the time,
his family was also fighting their Rakhine neighbours in court over a piece of land. A portion of their
landed property was confiscated by their Rakhine neighbour; Ali’s family went to the police to file a
report, but they were ignored.
Ali left Sittwe in 2010 and moved to Yangon (formerly Rangoon), the capital city of Myanmar, where he managed to work in several places for nearly 2 years, hiding the fact that he was from Rakhine state and passing himself off as a local Myanmar Muslim. During this time, he worked on applying for his passport so that he could travel out of the country. The first time he applied for a passport, he did so through a Burmese agent, paying a bribe of K300,000 (approximately RM816.39); after many months, he discovered that the government would not issue him a passport because his father’s name indicated that he is Rohingya Muslim. Ali waited for a year and applied again. This time, he falsified both his and his father’s names and claimed to be Buddhist. Again, he had to bribe the agent.

In 2012, communal violence broke out in Rakhine state and Ali’s father was arrested. Ali was devastated by the news. His mother insisted that he should leave the country, as the authorities were also searching for him and he could also be jailed. Around the same time, Ali’s employer in Yangon also came to know his real (Rohingya) identity, and he was fired from his job. In 2013, Ali fled to Malaysia.

[Someone knocked on Ali’s office door, breaking into his silent thoughts.]

Ali: Who’s there?

It was Ali’s caretaker, saying: A woman from Kelantan (a Malaysian state in the north) wants to see you, Sir. She said her name is Asma Poli.

Ali: Let her in.

**Ali’s Dream’s Door for the Refugee Children**

The Rohingya Community Organization (RCO) of which Ali is the head was formed in 2010 to advocate the needs of Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers and to provide support to the community in Malaysia. Aung Thu Ali is the third President of this organization. The previous two presidents were relocated to developed countries under the UN’s third Country Repatriation Program, which is what many refugees hope for. Now, Ali and his Deputy President, Abdul Rahim, run this organization for their community. They do not have many volunteers to help organize activities. The organization depends on occasional individual donations and support from NGOs and religious welfare associations. However, RCO is in a more advantageous position, compared with many other Rohingya community organizations located throughout Malaysia, as it is one of the only two organizations recognized by the UNHCR. Its activities include primary school education for children, healthcare for refugees and other social welfare activities. Occasionally, UNHCR provides financial support to run these projects.

Ali is grateful that the Malaysian authorities and the police department have shown tolerance and allowed them to stay in the country. But what is the future after this, Ali ponders. He is not sure. As he said:

The authorities know we exist. They know what we are doing. Sometimes they call us for discussion and clarification, but things move slow[ly], or sometimes do not move at all. Life remains the same as [being] stateless in a foreign country.

Today, in front of Ali’s desk, Asma Poli has come from Kelantan, accompanied by her two sons (ages 2 and 5) to follow up on her ill husband’s non-payment case. This is her story:
During Ramadan in the previous year, Poli’s husband had gone to Ipoh (leaving his family in Kelantan) to work at a construction site. After 3 months of work, his employer paid him less than half of his promised salary and asked him to leave the site.

The same thing happened to five other workers, some of whom were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Six of the employees brought their complaints to the attention of the Bangladeshi Workers Group, which called the employer on their behalf, though he never answered the phone. The employer threatened the employees with physical injuries and police action. Ultimately, those six workers had to leave Ipoh without their salary. Several had no money to return to their families and had to borrow.

Poli’s husband brought the matter to UNHCR and was told that there was not much it could do for him, as Malaysian law precludes refugees from working legally. As there is nothing on the refugee card that states, ‘Working is prohibited’, Poli’s husband had requested RCO’s help; Poli was now following up on the matter.

Ali explains to Poli that the RCO was trying their best to help; that they had spoken with Poli’s employer, but he had not shown any signs of cooperation and had instead denied that the workers had ever worked on his site. Ali assures Poli that his organization will continue to try, but that Poli also must understand their constraints, as they are a community-based organization and not a government-sponsored organization. Poli explains that there is no food at her home and that her husband is sick. She needs to work. Ali fully understands her situation. He patiently explains that there are many other refugees, documented and undocumented, facing similar situations, as refugees cannot legally work in Malaysia; therefore, they are at the mercy of their employer to be treated right. Undocumented refugees are even more vulnerable, as they do not come under UNHCR’s protection. Ali’s organization, RCO, does not have any authority to provide work to refugees. Poli explains that whenever she asked the police or employers pointedly, ‘Without earning, how would we survive, and what would we eat?’, she often received rude answers. Once she was told to ‘eat garbage’ (makan sampah), or ‘steal and survive’ (mencuri dan terus hidup). On another occasion, she was told that the refugee card is not a work permit. They are given asylum, not permission to work. Ali feels despondent. He suggests that Poli join RCO’s shelter for women to learn skills such as sewing, jewellery making and cooking traditional foods, though the shelter primarily caters to women who are victims of domestic violence, widows and the destitute, offering training to enable them to be self-sustainable. Ali also offers to provide Poli with a ‘protection letter’ on behalf of his organization, which she could use to look for a job in informal sectors in Kelantan where her family is currently located, even though he knows that the protection letter would not make any difference.

Every day, Ali comes across many cases such as this.

As an organization, RCO faces numerous challenges. Securing funding has always been one of their major challenges. Ali and his team are often involved in many different functions, from legal assistance to interpretation, translation, looking for ways to pay the office rental, salaries and other expenses to run the organization. Ali makes a lot of effort to maintain his extended network with governmental ministries in Malaysia, human rights activist groups, journalists, reporters and NGOs to ensure RCO’s existence. As it is not a regular registered NGO, it needs to do a lot of activities to survive.

RCO also competes with other community-based organizations in Malaysia, as there are 164,620 refugees and asylum-seekers from nine different countries, including Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Myanmar. The Myanmar community itself comprises Rohingya, Chin, Myanmar Muslims, Rakhine and other ethnicities. There are various NGOs representing all of the major communities, and they all compete for UNHCR’s recognition. RCO needs to compete with them, too, even though UNCHR already recognizes them. Moreover, one practical problem is that being a refugee community-based organization, RCO cannot open a bank account. The Malaysian
authority deals with this discreetly. Previously, they were allowed to maintain a joint account with UNHCR, though it is now prohibited. Refugees are also not allowed to open a bank account using their UN-issued card. Therefore, it is very difficult for a community-based organization to secure grants or receive financial support.

**Education: Ali’s Future Dream’s Door for the Refugees**

RCO runs a community school that provides primary school education to Rohingya children. The school has been in existence for nearly 5 years. Abdul Rahim, Deputy President of RCO, is the headmaster of the school. It mostly follows the Malaysian primary school syllabus, with students studying Malay language, English, Science, Mathematics and religion (Islam). Other than the conventional subjects, the curriculum also includes vocational education, which provides students with the opportunity to learn how to sew and make some souvenirs that they can sell to earn money.

As a community school, they also face a myriad of challenges in terms of finance and resources. Currently, the school has only three teachers and three volunteers teaching 84 students. It maintains three sessions—morning, afternoon and evening—to accommodate all students. The three teachers teaching the major subjects (Malay language, English, Science and Mathematics) are Malaysian nationals, receiving salaries of RM1,000 to RM1,200, paid for by the UNCHR. The volunteers mainly teach religion and vocational education and receive no payment. The student population is rather diverse, ranging in age from 5 to 13. The two classrooms are often crowded, as it has to cater to students from different age groups, with varying levels of intelligence and maturity. Refugee parents often raise their concern that their children are not receiving proper education, and that there is no future for their progeny, as this form of education does not lead to any degree or certificate that can count towards higher education or work.

As refugee children do not have access to government-run schools, those who attend informal schools such as these can only study up to the equivalent of 6th grade. These schools do not offer secondary or upper secondary level education, nor do they provide any certificates to enable them to continue with their education. Many refugee children, particularly boys, end up as child labourers, as they look for jobs to help their families out of poverty. It is even harder on female children, as they often take on heavy housework, caring for their younger siblings and end up getting married early. Rahim is concerned, as 50 per cent of refugee children do not attend school at all. He tries to encourage refugee parents to enrol their children in the school, reminding them that elementary education is still important so that their children can at least learn to read and write. However, the parents complain about the enrolment fee of RM50, and the monthly fee (up to RM300) is too much for them to bear. Therefore, the informal education offered by Madrasah Tahfiz schools is a popular choice, as the fee is much less.

Rahim laments as it is difficult to attract children to the school. There are some practical problems, such as the fact that the school is located in the city area, whereas refugees mostly prefer to hide in the village (kampung) areas. Also, the school does not provide transportation, and the parents cannot afford the time, effort or money to bring their children to the school. There are times when refugee parents prefer their children to work and earn for the family than attending school since higher education is not an option for them anyway. In other cases, it is the youths who prioritize work over education, as they have to support their families here in Malaysia, as well as those they left behind in Myanmar. Hence, they cannot continue their studies. Rahim also has students who are orphans and are so impoverished that they come to class looking bedraggled and filthy. Rahim usually gives them a proper bath before allowing them to sit in class. On the bright side, he notes proudly that over the years, he knows of refugees who
can now communicate comfortably in English and fluently in Malay; this gives them a better chance at maintaining a network, which helps them find jobs locally.

The Plight of the Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: A Flashback on the Root Causes

The Rohingya diaspora’s migration and refugee life in Malaysia can be traced back to a few decades. They arrived in Malaysia by taking various risky paths. The Southeast Asian ‘boat people crisis’ and the discovery of 139 mass graves of Rohingya victims in 28 suspected human-trafficking camps on the Malaysia–Thailand border in 2015 are examples of their desperate journey to Malaysia. The reasons or root causes of their migration are connected to Burma/Myanmar (the country of origin) and its oppressive policies towards the Rohingya ethnic minority facing political unrest and genocide in the Rakhine (previously Arakan) state of Myanmar.

The ethnic tensions were deeply rooted in history even before Burma emerged as a nation. The Arakan region is the area that is geographically separated by the Mount Arakan (Arakan Yoma), separating this region from central Burma. Furthermore, this region was once the independent Arakan kingdom (ancient name Maruk-U) until the Burmese King Bodawpaya captured and incorporated the Arakan region into the kingdom of Ava in central Burma. Following the invasion, the continuing disorder was reported, as the Arakanese started rebelling against Burmese oppression, which lasted quite strongly between 1790 and 1797. As a result, thousands of people, both Muslim and Buddhist Arakanese, from this area escaped to Bengal, the adjoining British colonial territory. At that point, the Rohingya population was identified as Arakanese Muslims, not as Rohingya. The community consciously identified themselves as Rohingya in the post-independence era, as the changing nature of borderlands’ geography constructed, reshaped and complicated their identity.

During the time of the British colonial period, the situation became more complicated when the British imperial power colonized Burma through a series of wars between 1824 and 1886. They first annexed Arakan and used it as a buffer zone with the intention of invading mainland Burma. As the Arakanese experienced severe oppression by the Burmese king, they immediately backed the British when the colonisers offered them their support. Moreover, by 1925, the preferential recruitment policy of the British that completely excluded the Burmese from the colonial armed forces, replacing them with the Arakanese, Kachin, Chin and Karan, created a sense of ethnic insecurity among the Burmese, who saw this as a potential instrument of oppression and control by other ethnic minorities. To compound the situation, the British military even used the armed forces (comprising ethnic minorities) to suppress Burmese resistance to British rule, which formed a tense and conflicting relationship between the Burmese and ethnic minorities. Consequently, these ethnic minorities were perceived by the Burmese government to be collaborators with the British enemy. It is an important reason that demarcated the boundaries between ethnic minorities and the Burmese, affecting government decisions later on.

During the years close to independence, Burmese leaders disagreed on how to manage ethnic conflicts and were divided into two groups. One group believed in what their visionary leader General Aung San believed, that in order to put an end to the enduring ethnic conflict, the new nation should follow a federal-state system. However, other nationalist leaders opposed this policy, arguing instead for the creation of a single Mahabama or Great Burman nationality. Following the assassination of General Aung San, and the country’s independence in January 1948, the nationalist leaders’ views were implemented in the post-independence era. It wanted to create ‘national unity’ through the development and use of a common language and education system and shared national culture. Since the Burmese are
considered central to Burmese society, their culture, identity and language received priority, and minorities were automatically transferred to the periphery. Undoubtedly, minority leaders saw this unitary assimilation policy as unrealistic and a threat to their own cultural and ethnic identities. These internal conflicts in Burma kept the country in a state of chaos throughout the first 14 years of independence until General Ne Win seized power in a coup in 1962. It was, in fact, one of the justifications provided by the military junta that to bring state unity, the country needs strong leadership and military rule.

The policies of the military junta were even harsher towards the ethnic minorities. In a strong symbolic gesture, the military regime replaced the country’s colonial name of Burma to Myanmar, which translates to mean Burmese. Likewise, they changed the name of other states to suit their political-symbolic purposes, for example, Arakan is now Rakhine (naming it after the Majority Buddhist community), Rangoon is now Yangon, and so on. Its ethnic policy has been to forcibly assimilate various ethnic groups into one unified Burmese identity. It even reformed the constitution and the Burma Citizenship Law (1982) in such a way that recognized 135 distinctive ‘ethnic nationalities’, but rejected the ethnic Rohingya, literally making them ‘stateless’ of Myanmar. Now the question is why the government policy is harder towards the Rohingya as compared to the Rakhine from the Rakhine/Arakan state? The rationale behind this could be many. First, as the government perceived the Rohingya as collaborators with the British enemy, they were not deemed compatible with the push to promote a sense of national solidarity. Second, since their religion Islam differs from the dominant practice of Buddhism and also differs from the Buddhist Rakhine, it was easy for government officials to interpret and represent the Rohingya as ‘others’. Third, this is what behind the effort of ‘remaking of Rakhine’ as part of a greater Myanmar that continues today—by militarizing the state, patronizing the in-migration of Rakhine population from various areas to the Rakhine state, making Rakhine that look increasingly like the majority culture, language and religion. This has positively eased Rakhines’ integration into the Myanmar nation-state but has simultaneously undermined Rohingyas’ aspirations.

The entire Rakhine state has been militarized. Rohingya ethnic minority’s basic rights and needs were denied. They were displaced from their home/land not once but several times and then put into detention camps commonly known as the ‘model village’ areas, where their private and public life have merged, and again forces to flee from there, by burning their model villages. So, to save their lives, the Rohingya community have fled to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and beyond Asia. In Malaysia, there are a total of 178,100 refugees and asylum-seekers from nine different countries (as of November 2019), of which more than half—98,740—are ‘stateless’ Rohingya registered with the UNHCR, and the rest an estimated number of 30,000–40,000 more remain undocumented. Both the documented and undocumented Rohingya refugees in Malaysia live throughout Peninsular Malaysia, scattered among the local population in urban and rural settings.

Statelessness in a World of Laws and Conventions

The Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954) defines a stateless person as one who is ‘not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law’. Some stateless people crossed the international border and became ‘refugees’ in another country. It also means that not all refugees are stateless, and many stateless people never crossed on an international border. According to recent estimates, there are some 11 million stateless persons around the world—of which about one-third are children. A child born of stateless parents usually becomes stateless. Although some countries, for instance, Japan, Italy, Poland and Turkey grant nationality unconditionally, there are still far too many countries wherein statelessness would seem like a disease that can be inherited.
Statelessness can occur due to several reasons, including discrimination against particular ethnic or religious groups or on the basis of gender; the emergence of new States and transfers of territory between existing States; and loopholes in nationality laws. Whatever might be the cause, statelessness is a product of politics. It is a human-made phenomenon which has serious consequences for the people in almost every country and all regions of the world. The stateless individuals are denied a nationality and have often been forced to flee their natural or ancestral place of residence; therefore, becoming internally displaced persons, commonly known as IDPs. As a result, they often are denied rights to education and healthcare facilities, employment opportunities and business and commercial activities. Similarly, when they cross the country’s border, they often face similar difficulty in accessing basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. Without these basic amenities in life, they can face a lifetime of obstacles and disappointment.

The Rohingya ethnic minority’s statelessness is grounded in the principle of sovereignty and arises out of the conflict of Myanmar’s nationality laws, in which the country recognizes the only member of certain ethnic groups to be eligible for citizenship and denationalized the Rohingya. This change in nationality law affected the Rohingya identity and deprived them of the protection of the state because citizenship not only provides people with a sense of identity, it entitles individuals to the protection of a state and many civil and political rights. However, as a member of the UN, Myanmar is legally obligated to promote ‘universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedom for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion’ as mentioned in Article 55 and 56 of the UN Charter. Furthermore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), although admittedly not a binding document, also provides in Article 15 that every individual around the world is entitled to all the rights mentioned in the Declaration, including the right to have a legal connection with a State. Citizenship (or nationality) has been described as ‘the right to have rights’.

The UN, as an international organization, took various initiatives to eradicate statelessness. It is this link with refugee situations that initially led the United Nations General Assembly to designate the Office of the UNHCR as the agency responsible for overseeing the prevention and reduction of statelessness. The UNHCR, in collaboration with other agencies, has pledged to end statelessness. Other UN agencies, for instance, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), have long worked on improving birth registration and civil registries; the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) can help governments design and implement national censuses; and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) supports monitoring of the human rights of stateless people. To make it a success, these organizations must work together on each of the four areas related to statelessness—identification, prevention, reduction and protection, and work closely with countries producing stateless people and providing shelter to the stateless population from other countries.

**Education Marginalization and Shattering of Refugees’ Dream Door**

Although many international and regional legal instruments, bounded by the principles of non-discrimination and equality, recognize that education is a universal right, in several countries around the world, that right has been denied to around 263 million children and adolescents who either have never attended school or have dropped out. Among those who are out of school, girls and women form two-thirds of the world’s illiterate, indicating gender as a major dimension of this marginalization. For those who are attending school, in many cases, do not develop basic literacy and numeracy skills despite spending several years in school. The dropout rate among the girls is even higher, particularly for those
Future for Ali’s Dream Door

When Ali came to Malaysia, he came with great hopes that Malaysia would be safer for him. His plan was that he would complete his education and help his family in Myanmar. In reality, the first 2 years were a struggle, to find education and work. His dilemma was that his student visa would not allow him to work in Malaysia; yet, on the other hand, without higher education, he would not be able to find a decent job. He tried doing odd jobs during this time to sustain himself, but could not send any money to help his mother at home. Reality hit hard when his Myanmar passport expired, and the Myanmar embassy in Kuala Lumpur refused to issue a new one. Without a valid passport, Ali could neither pursue his dream to education, nor could he earn any money to survive. The situation left him with no other option but to register himself with the UNHCR as a refugee. Despite his dream, Ali could not continue his education. Now, 6 years after he left Myanmar, he has fathered two beautiful children who are attending an informal school in Malaysia. Will the dream door to education ever open for Ali’s children? This remains a big question in Ali’s mind.

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Note

1. Shophouse is quite popular in Southeast Asia. It is a type of building of which downstairs is used as a shop opening on to the pavement and upstairs are usually used as the owner’s residence. However, in these days, upstairs is also rented out on commercial basis.