

Addressing Statelessness  
and Displacements in  
Southeast Asia

# WORKSHOP REPORT

***January 23rd and 24th, 2025***

*Center on Gender and Forced  
Displacement (CGFD)  
Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)  
International Association for the Study  
of Forced Migration (IASFM),  
Gadjah Mada University  
International Development Research  
Centre (IDRC)*



CENTER ON  
GENDER AND  
FORCED  
DISPLACEMENT  
ADDRESSING GENDER GAP ON FORCED DISPLACEMENT



IDRC - CRDI  
International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada



## **Addressing Statelessness and Displacements in Southeast Asia**

**Introduction:** The Centre on Gender and Forced Displacement (CGFD), with the support of IDRC, organized a two-session workshop on January 23–24, 2025, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on the challenges of statelessness, forced displacement, and migration governance in Southeast Asia. This workshop integrated academic and policy-oriented discussions, bridging theoretical frameworks with actionable policy recommendations. The workshop critically engaged with the historical legacies of colonialism, the securitization of migration, gendered vulnerabilities, and alternative governance imaginaries, with a particular emphasis on the Rohingya crisis and its broader regional implications.

**Thematic Framework** The workshop examined how colonial legacies, state-centric governance, and restrictive legal frameworks continued to shape migration dynamics in Southeast Asia. It also explored alternative governance approaches, including community-led initiatives, informal protection networks, and transnational collaborations, as pathways to challenge exclusionary nation-state paradigms. The discussions centered around ASEAN's role, the legal and socio-political barriers faced by stateless populations, and gender-sensitive migration policies.

**Workshop Structure** The workshop was structured as two interlinked sessions:

**Session 1 (January 23, 2025): Academic Roundtable**

**Theme:** *South Asian Migration in Southeast Asia: Refugees, Statelessness, Migrant Labor, and Gender Dynamics through a Postcolonial Lens*

This session brought together leading scholars and researchers to critically examine migration flows from South Asia to Southeast Asia, engaging with postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and Derrida's concept of conditional hospitality. Discussions explored colonial-era labor mobilization, border-making, and the systemic exclusion of stateless groups.

**Key Discussion Points:**

- How did colonial legacies continue to shape migration policies and border practices in Southeast Asia?
- What were the gendered dimensions of forced displacement, particularly regarding women and youth in migration governance?
- How did climate-induced migration intersect with existing displacement frameworks?
- How could ASEAN develop a more inclusive approach to addressing statelessness and forced migration?

**Session 2 (January 24, 2025): Policy-Oriented Dialogue**

**Theme:** *The Rohingya Challenge in Southeast Asia: Statelessness, Gender Dynamics, and Regional Policy Responses*

This session focused on the practical and policy implications of forced displacement, with a specific focus on the Rohingya crisis. It brought together policymakers, practitioners, and civil society representatives to develop evidence-based solutions that addressed legal and socio-political challenges faced by stateless populations.

Key Discussion Points:

- How could ASEAN redefine its role in managing refugee crises while balancing the principle of noninterference with humanitarian responsibilities?
- How could gender-sensitive approaches be integrated into policies addressing the Rohingya crisis?
- What role did civil society and academia play in shaping policy interventions for stateless and refugee communities?
- How could youth engagement initiatives empower stateless populations and influence migration policies?

Expected Outcomes:

- **Policy Recommendations:** Formulating actionable strategies that strengthened legal protections for stateless individuals and refugees.
- **Academic Publications:** Producing research articles and reports to inform migration governance frameworks.
- **Youth Engagement Initiatives:** Developing strategies to empower Rohingya youth in advocacy and policy discussions.

**Conclusion:** By integrating academic and policy perspectives, this workshop created a cohesive dialogue that advanced nuanced and transformative responses to forced displacement in Southeast Asia. The discussions sought to bridge the gap between research and practice, generating informed strategies for sustainable and inclusive migration governance.



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IASFM  
International Association for the Study of Forced Migration

## ADDRESSING STATELESSNESS AND DISPLACEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

📅 DATE: JANUARY 23RD AND 24TH, 2025

📍 VENUE: GADJAH MADA UNIVERSITY, YOGYAKARTA



HOSTED BY: CENTER ON GENDER AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT  
(CGFD) - ASIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (AIT)

### 💡 DISCUSSION FOCUS:

- COLONIAL LEGACIES AND STATELESSNESS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
- GENDERED IMPACTS ON DISPLACED COMMUNITIES AND MIGRANT LABOR
- ACTIONABLE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATELESS GROUPS LIKE THE ROHINGYA
- THIS EVENT AIMS TO DEVELOP INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE SOCIO-POLITICAL INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND TO ENGAGE CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLICYMAKERS IN COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS.

### 🔥 KEY SPEAKERS:

- ROULA EL RIFAI (SENIOR PROGRAM SPECIALIST, DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE DIVISION, IDRC)
- PROFESSOR PURWO SANTOSO (HOD, POLITICAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITAS GADJAH MADA)
- PROFESSOR RANABIR SAMADDAR (DISTINGUISHED CHAIR, CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP)
- PROFESSOR NASREEN CHOWDHORY (DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF DELHI,)
- PROFESSOR PAULA BANERJEE (IDRC ENDOWED CHAIR, CENTER ON GENDER AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT, AIT)
- PROFESSOR MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA (EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RESEARCH INITIATIVES, BANGLADESH)

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DIALOGUE ON MIGRATION,  
STATELESSNESS, AND GENDERED  
EXPERIENCES IN SOUTH AND  
SOUTHEAST ASIA! THIS EVENT  
WILL FEATURE DISTINGUISHED  
SPEAKERS ADDRESSING COMPLEX  
HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND THEIR  
SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS  
FOR DISPLACED COMMUNITIES.

HOSTED BY THE CENTER ON  
GENDER AND FORCED  
DISPLACEMENT (CGFD) AT THE  
ASIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
(AIT), IN COLLABORATION WITH  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE STUDY OF FORCED  
MIGRATION (IASFM), GADJAH  
MADA UNIVERSIT AND,  
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
RESEARCH CENTRE (IDRC) .

**The Yogyakarta Workshop on Forced Displacement, Statelessness, and Migration Governance** in Southeast Asia, structured across two sessions on January 23–24, 2025, and organized by the Centre on Gender and Forced Displacement (CGFD) with IDRC support, convened leading scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to critically examine the limitations of state-centric governance models in addressing displacement. *The sessions were embedded within the IASFM 20 framework, aligning with its thematic focus while maintaining their distinct identity as plenary and extraordinary sessions, offering a critical space for dialogue that extended beyond*

*conventional academic discourse on forced displacement and migration governance.*

Discussions engaged with the intersections of statelessness, labor precarity, and forced migration, emphasizing the urgent need for inclusive, rights-based frameworks that challenge exclusionary nation-state paradigms and center the agency of displaced populations, particularly the Rohingya, whose protracted displacement necessitates nuanced policy interventions. Participants interrogated the securitization of migration policies, the instrumentalization of humanitarianism, and the structural inequalities that render displacement an enduring condition. The sessions foregrounded alternative governance imaginaries, including community-led initiatives, informal protection networks, and transnational collaborations, as pathways beyond restrictive legal frameworks. Featuring eminent scholars such as Prof. Paula Banerjee (IDRC Chair, CGFD), Roula El-Rifai (IDRC), Prof. Ranabir Samaddar, Prof. Purwo Santoso, Prof. Nasreen Chowdhury, Prof. Meghna Guha Thakurta, Dr. Mikio Oishi, and Ms. Yuniar Paramita Sari (Migrasia), alongside Dr. Priya Singh (CGFD), the workshop generated critical intellectual and policy-oriented dialogues that will inform future migration governance frameworks.

The Yogyakarta Workshop on Forced Displacement, Statelessness, and Migration Governance in Southeast Asia, structured across two in-depth sessions on January 23rd and 24th, 2025, engaged scholars, policymakers, and humanitarian practitioners in critical discussions on the structural injustices underpinning contemporary displacement crises, with a particular focus on the Rohingya and the broader implications of statelessness. Professor Paula Banerjee highlighted the systemic neglect of stateless populations, emphasizing that the Rohingya crisis extends beyond Myanmar, reflecting entrenched global exclusionary regimes and the persistent failure of states to adopt proactive legal frameworks. Discussions critically examined ASEAN's role in managing displacement, identifying the noninterference principle as a fundamental barrier to regional cooperation while underscoring the necessity of recalibrating ASEAN's engagement to prevent further humanitarian crises. Roula El-Rifai (IDRC), the workshop's moderator, emphasized the urgency of transitioning from reactive humanitarian aid to policies that facilitate economic and social inclusion, challenging the prevailing notion of refugees as transient populations. The exploration of alternative governance models underscored the potential of community-led initiatives, informal protection networks, and cross-border collaborations as viable mechanisms to circumvent state-centric asylum frameworks. Professor Ranabir Samaddar asserted that humanitarian responses alone are insufficient without political will and structural transformation, warning that failure to address statelessness risks perpetuating intergenerational cycles of displacement. Professor Purwo Santoso reinforced this perspective by drawing attention to Indonesia's grassroots interventions, demonstrating the efficacy of bottom-up, locally driven strategies. The workshop concluded with a strong call for reconceptualizing migration governance beyond nation-state paradigms, urging a shift toward sustainable, rights-based solutions that recognize displacement not as a temporary crisis but as a structural reality necessitating durable, inclusive, and regionally coordinated responses.



**DAY 1**  
**JANUARY, 23 2025**

**1. SPEAKER 1: PROF. MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA**

**Analytical Perspectives on Statelessness, Migration, and Identity**

Prof. Meghna's discourse on the inaugural day of the panel provided a profound and multidimensional examination of statelessness, migration, and identity through the lens of postcolonial critique. She meticulously deconstructed the notion that migration crises are contemporary anomalies, instead situating them within the historical continuum of colonial boundary-making and exclusionary statecraft. Delving into the historical genesis and theoretical underpinnings of statelessness, she asserted that colonial-era territorial demarcations, wrought without consideration of fluid ethnic identities, have engendered a postcolonial predicament where certain populations find themselves perpetually disenfranchised. The plight of the Rohingya, as she articulated, epitomizes the lingering impact of colonial governance structures, wherein ethnic minorities are deliberately relegated to the periphery of legal and political recognition.



Drawing upon critical migration theories, she expounded on the idea that statelessness is not merely an absence of nationality but a strategic tool wielded by modern nation-states to fortify ethno-nationalistic hegemony. Her analysis underscored how migration governance intersects with sovereignty, exposing the calculated mechanisms by which states perpetuate exclusionary citizenship regimes. In her incisive gendered critique of migration policies, the speaker illuminated the multifaceted vulnerabilities faced by stateless women and children. She articulated how gender biases entrenched within refugee governance structures systematically obscure the lived realities of female refugees, thus reinforcing cycles of dispossession and precarity. According to her, the discourse on migration must undergo a paradigmatic shift, moving beyond generic humanitarian narratives to embrace gender-sensitive frameworks that ensure substantive protections for women refugees, particularly those at heightened risk of exploitation, trafficking, and systemic violence.

Further expanding on the politics of visibility and representation, she critically engaged with the humanitarian-industrial complex, underscoring the paradox wherein refugees are simultaneously hyper-visible in global humanitarian discourse yet remain politically invisible in decision-making arenas. She strongly advocated for the reconfiguration of refugee identity beyond mere victimhood, urging the adoption of participatory governance models that empower stateless individuals as active agents in shaping policy narratives that govern their futures. By embedding refugee perspectives into policymaking frameworks, she contended, the international community could mitigate the perils of

objectification and instrumentalization inherent in dominant refugee discourse.

## 2. SPEAKER 2: PROF. RANABIR SAMADDAR

### Protection as Punishment

Prof. Ranabir Samaddar's intervention critically examined the indissoluble relationship between protection and punishment in the global humanitarian framework. He traced the conceptual genealogy of this paradigm, arguing that the doctrine of "responsibility to protect" (R2P), initially conceived as a mechanism to safeguard human rights, has often served as a pretext for punitive interventions. Drawing on historical examples, he referenced the Libyan bombing campaign of 2011, illustrating how Western liberal internationalism's aspiration to supersede national sovereignty in favor of cosmopolitan law and human rights paradoxically led to increased anarchy and insecurity. Through a comparative analysis, he extended this critique to similar interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, demonstrating that such efforts have consistently conflated protection with disciplinary control rather than fostering stability and peace. Prof. Samaddar then expanded his discussion to urban security governance, specifically in South Asia and beyond.



He situated his argument within colonial India's history of epidemic control, particularly the Bubonic Plague outbreak in Mumbai (1897), where the Epidemic Diseases Act provided the British administration extensive powers to police urban spaces under the pretext of containment. He contended that the strategies employed during this crisis mass displacement, forced labor regulation, and securitization formed the foundation for contemporary border regimes and surveillance practices in postcolonial states. He further analyzed the 21st-century migration corridors, focusing on cities such as Marseille, Naples, Karachi, Kolkata, Bangkok, Johannesburg, and Cairo, which he described as liminal spaces of survival and resistance. These cities, despite their classification as disorderly and chaotic, have become hubs of new cosmopolitanism, where migrant populations, stateless groups, and refugees create alternative governance networks outside formal state structures.

He emphasized that while governments deploy digital tracking, biometric surveillance, and militarized policing in the name of protection, these measures often reinforce exclusionary regimes rather than offering genuine security. In his concluding remarks, he problematized the figure of the refugee, arguing that contemporary governance structures perpetuate statelessness as an enforced condition rather than an administrative failure. He provocatively asked whether it is possible to conceptualize a governance model where "care" replaces "punishment", thereby shifting the discourse from control to empowerment.

### **3. SPEAKER 3: PROF. NASREEN CHOWDHORY**

#### **Migration and the Everyday Forms of 'State' in the Asia-Pacific Region**

Prof. Nasreen Chowdhory's presentation provided a critical analysis of the intersections between statelessness, citizenship, and migration governance in the Asia-Pacific region. She interrogated the post-Westphalian conceptualization of statehood, arguing that conventional legal frameworks shaped predominantly by Eurocentric discourse—have failed to account for the colonial and postcolonial evolution of state structures. The simultaneous existence of the imperial state and the colonial state, she contended, necessitated a reevaluation of the relationships between state authority, subjecthood, and rights.

Drawing from Hannah Arendt's legalist perspective, Prof. Chowdhory explored how the modern state renders stateless populations invisible, depriving them of even the most basic entitlements. She emphasized that statelessness should not be understood merely as a legal deficiency but as a structural and existential condition that determines individuals' capacity to access rights, mobility, and state protection. Scholars such as Blitz, she noted, have critiqued the "right to have rights" paradigm, arguing that such a framework remains restrictive, tying statelessness solely to reforms in nationality laws rather than addressing its deeper structural causes.

Prof. Chowdhory introduced the concept of "everyday state", examining how stateless persons navigate bureaucratic structures in ways that defy the rigid binaries of citizen/non-citizen. She highlighted the case of de facto and quasi-stateless populations, illustrating how legal citizenship does not necessarily guarantee access to rights and resources. The discussion incorporated empirical evidence from South Asia's transborder migration flows, focusing on how refugees, internally displaced persons, and undocumented migrants experience statehood as a fragmented and negotiable entity.

Further, she explored in-situ statelessness, where individuals within their country of birth are systematically denied rights, alongside ex-situ statelessness, wherein displacement exacerbates marginalization. Drawing on Caia Vlieks' scholarship on spatialized statelessness, she argued that the location of stateless individuals whether in urban informal settlements, refugee camps, or border zones fundamentally shapes their capacity for self-organization and survival. By juxtaposing different stateless populations across the Asia-Pacific, she illuminated the intricate power dynamics that underpin contemporary governance structures.

In conclusion, she called for a reconceptualization of statehood beyond legal formalism, urging scholars and policymakers to adopt a multi-scalar approach that accounts for the lived experiences of statelessness. She contended that empirical research into everyday governance mechanisms such as informal bureaucratic negotiations and localized survival strategies could provide critical insights for designing more inclusive migration policies.

### **4. SPEAKER 4: PROF. PAULA BANERJEE**

#### **The Southern Question and Gendered Displacement**

Professor Paula Banerjee delivered an incisive examination of the intersection between migration, displacement, and gender, focusing particularly on refugee and migrant women in urban spaces. She introduced her discussion by framing the Southern Question as one inherently tied to the precarious mobility of women, particularly those forced to migrate due to conflict, persecution, and economic precarity. Using Kolkata as a case study, she traced how migrant and refugee women navigate statelessness through informal labor and social networks. Unlike male refugees who may have access to limited employment opportunities, women are often driven to the margins of the informal economy, engaging in domestic work, sex work, and other forms of labor that



sustain their anonymity.

She highlighted that for many of these women, legal status is secondary to economic survival, leading them to negotiate de facto statelessness through adaptive, albeit precarious, strategies. Prof. Banerjee explored the historical trajectory of gendered migration, situating contemporary patterns of displacement within colonial and postcolonial labor dynamics. She noted that Kolkata has long served as a hub for female labor migration, receiving women from Bangladesh, Nepal, and even Somalia, who, despite lacking formal recognition, have carved out spaces of legitimacy through everyday negotiations with the state and society.

Her discussion also addressed the complex relationship between state governance and female refugees, emphasizing that while statelessness is a legal condition, it is also an embodied experience. She underscored how governmental policies, rather than providing protection, often exacerbate the vulnerabilities of displaced women, pushing them further into precarity and systemic exclusion. In her concluding remarks for the first day, Prof. Banerjee called for a more gender-sensitive approach to refugee governance, one that recognizes the agency and resilience of displaced women while challenging the punitive logics of migration control. She argued that instead of reinforcing hierarchies of legality and exclusion, policymakers must engage with the lived realities of stateless women and develop frameworks that ensure economic inclusion, legal recognition, and gender-sensitive protections.

## **CONCLUSION**

The first session concluded with Moderator Roula El Rifai synthesizing the diverse perspectives presented throughout the day, emphasizing the interconnectedness of statelessness, displacement, and migration governance within South and Southeast Asia. She underscored how the discussions reflected the urgent need to reconceptualize refugee governance beyond rigid legal frameworks, shifting toward a more holistic, historically informed, and intersectional approach. She noted that the panelists collectively challenged conventional understandings of displacement, highlighting how statelessness is not merely a legal deficiency but a deeply entrenched socio-political condition shaped by historical injustices, exclusionary policies, and global power asymmetries.

The discussions illustrated how the state's role in migration governance often oscillates between protection and control, reinforcing structural inequalities rather than addressing the core drivers of forced displacement. The absence of legal recognition, coupled with restrictive mobility regimes and economic precarity, perpetuates cycles of rightlessness, making refugee populations highly susceptible to exploitation, violence, and marginalization. The moderator acknowledged the limitations of international governance mechanisms, particularly the failure of regional actors such as ASEAN and global institutions like UNHCR to implement sustainable and politically viable solutions. Despite the increasing securitization of migration and the normalization of containment strategies, the panelists advanced the necessity of community-driven responses, grassroots advocacy, and transnational coalitions to push for meaningful policy transformations. This reinforced the argument that solutions to statelessness must extend beyond legal codifications to encompass lived realities, economic agency, and the fundamental right to dignity. Another critical takeaway from the session was the emergence of technology as both an instrument of protection and a tool of surveillance. The growing reliance on biometric registration, digital identification, and data-driven governance has introduced new ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding privacy, autonomy, and the agency of displaced individuals. The discussion highlighted how such technologies, while ostensibly meant to streamline aid distribution and security, often reinforce exclusion by entrenching bureaucratic barriers and limiting refugees' access to

fundamental rights and services. Furthermore, the session reinforced that the gendered dimensions of forced migration cannot be overlooked, as refugee women, particularly those in informal economies, face disproportionate risks of exploitation, economic marginalization, and systemic erasure within policy frameworks. The discussions revealed how migration governance remains deeply patriarchal, often neglecting the specific vulnerabilities and resilience strategies of displaced women.

The moderator stressed that any comprehensive approach to displacement must integrate a gender lens, ensuring that legal protections, labor rights, and social services are tailored to address the complex realities faced by women in refugee and stateless communities. In concluding the session, she called for a paradigm shift in refugee and migration policy, one that prioritizes long-term integration over temporary containment, legal inclusion over bureaucratic exclusion, and transnational solidarity over fragmented national responses. The first day's discussions established a strong intellectual foundation for reassessing the Rohingya crisis, the broader politics of statelessness, and the evolving challenges of global displacement. Moving forward, she emphasized that a multi-pronged approach encompassing legal reform, regional diplomacy, historical justice, and bottom-up advocacy is essential to forging a sustainable and humane response to one of the most pressing humanitarian issues of our time.

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## **DAY 2**

**JANUARY, 24 2025**

### **1. SPEAKER 1: PROF. MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA**

#### **Policy Recommendations and Structural Interventions**

On the second day of deliberations, Prof. Meghna pivoted towards the domain of policy formulation and structural interventions, articulating a compelling vision for recalibrating regional migration governance to foster the socio-political inclusion of stateless populations. Her discourse was firmly anchored in a macro-structural analysis of state and supranational frameworks, wherein she delineated the imperative of multi-tiered intervention strategies that transcend the myopic humanitarian model. Elaborating on ASEAN's institutional role, she meticulously dissected the limitations imposed by the non-interference principle, which has historically curtailed decisive action against Myanmar's egregious violations of Rohingya rights. Nevertheless, she also identified emergent opportunities within ASEAN's evolving diplomatic architecture, advocating for a regional statelessness task force dedicated to policy harmonization, data standardization, and strategic coordination among member states.

Her propositions extended towards fortifying bilateral engagements, particularly in fostering temporary protection measures for Rohingya communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. She stressed that the efficacy of refugee governance is contingent on the seamless collaboration between governmental actors, civil society organizations, and academic institutions to engender research-driven policy frameworks that reconcile humanitarian imperatives with pragmatic state interests.

In a trenchant critique of international legal paradigms, she problematized the limited traction of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness within Southeast Asia. To bridge this lacuna, she advanced a progressive legal roadmap, urging regional actors to:

- 1) Develop legal pathways for temporary work permits that enable stateless individuals to contribute to host economies without compromising their protected status.
- 2) Establish cross-border legislative harmonization to streamline asylum-processing mechanisms and alleviate bureaucratic impediments to legal residency.
- 3) Integrate stateless populations into national legal frameworks, granting them unfettered access to fundamental human rights, including education, healthcare, and labor protections.

Furthermore, she emphasized the necessity of embedding humanitarian aid initiatives within sustainable development paradigms, asserting that fragmented short-term relief measures perpetuate dependency rather than fostering long-term resilience. She proposed that policy interventions should pivot towards economic self-sufficiency models, advocating for:

- 1) The transformation of aid-driven support structures into vocational training programs, equipping stateless individuals with skills tailored to market demands.
- 2) The mobilization of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to fund refugee education and employment opportunities.
- 3) The expansion of public-private partnerships to enhance infrastructure development in refugee-hosting regions, ensuring equitable access to socio-economic resources for displaced populations.

In concluding her remarks, she issued a poignant call to reimagine statelessness not as an aberration but as an endemic feature of the contemporary state system. She implored policymakers, academics, and civil society actors to move beyond ad hoc interventions and instead forge ethical and political imperatives that dismantle the entrenched exclusionary mechanisms underpinning statelessness. As she succinctly stated:

*“The crisis of statelessness is not a failure of governance it is an intended consequence of governance. If we are to address this issue meaningfully, we must begin by interrogating the very foundations upon which our legal and political systems rest.”*

Her concluding reflections underscored the urgent necessity for cross-sectoral collaboration, innovative policy interventions, and an unwavering commitment to human dignity in addressing the protracted plight of the stateless and forcibly displaced communities.

## **2. SPEAKER 2: PROF. RANABIR SAMADDAR**

### **Rethinking Statelessness Beyond the Punitive State**

Building upon his analysis from the previous session, Prof. Samaddar delved deeper into the politics of statelessness, questioning the prevailing assumption that refugee governance must necessarily operate within rigid legal frameworks. He called for a paradigm shift away from carceral humanitarianism and towards a model rooted in restorative justice and participatory governance. He argued that ASEAN’s non-interference principle, often cited as a limitation in responding to the Rohingya crisis, might paradoxically offer greater flexibility for adaptive, localized responses. By comparing South and Southeast Asia’s informal refugee management systems with the bureaucratic asylum structures of European nations that have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, he demonstrated how legal informality has, at times, allowed for more humane and context-sensitive responses to displacement.

He then turned to historical refugee responses in South Asia, referencing independent India’s early policies on public health, community development, and village autonomy, which were shaped by extensive pre-independence research conducted by nationalist and radical scholars. Drawing parallels with the South Bhutanese refugee crisis in Nepal, he emphasized that regional refugee governance must be integrated into broader peace-building efforts rather than treated as an isolated humanitarian challenge. Examining border governance as an entry point for reconceptualizing refugee protections, he criticized UNHCR’s rigid categorization of refugees as passive aid recipients, arguing instead that displaced populations must be recognized as political and economic actors. He stressed that many refugees are already engaged in informal economies as labor migrants, and thus, policies should reflect their dual status as both displaced persons and workers.

In discussing gender dynamics, he highlighted the disproportionate impact of statelessness on women, emphasizing healthcare access and education as critical domains where refugee protection mechanisms must be strengthened. He advocated for grassroots mobilization and movement-based policymaking, arguing that bottom-up advocacy efforts offer a more sustainable alternative to top-down state interventions. Prof. Samaddar concluded with a call for greater transnational collaboration among civil society organizations, academic institutions, and grassroots movements

to sustain pressure on governments for more inclusive and adaptive refugee policies. Drawing inspiration from Bertrand Russell's reflections on peace movements, he reminded the audience that even advocacy efforts deemed unsuccessful in the short term contribute to long-term shifts in policy and public consciousness.

### **3. SPEAKER 3: PROF. NASREEN CHOWDHORY**

#### **Statelessness, Surveillance, and the Politics of Refugee Governance**

Professor Nasreen Chowdhory examined the Rohingya refugee crisis through the intersecting lenses of citizenship, statelessness, and displacement, situating their plight within a historical and geopolitical framework. She drew a critical parallel between the Rohingya crisis and the "Palestinian question of the colonies", highlighting the systemic disenfranchisement that has rendered the Rohingya stateless and rightless. The speaker traced their historical transition from citizenship to forced displacement, emphasizing that statelessness is not merely the absence of legal recognition but a condition of profound exclusion that reconfigures the relationship between individuals and the state.

The speaker distinguished between in-situ and ex-situ statelessness, arguing that while in-situ stateless individuals remain within their country of origin but without rights, ex-situ statelessness deepens their marginalization through displacement. She analyzed host states' responses, noting that earlier waves of Rohingya refugees received greater protection, while later arrivals have faced stricter regulations and worsening living conditions. This shift, she argued, reflects not only the evolving geopolitical landscape but also the instrumentalization of statelessness as a governance strategy.

Examining the spatial dimensions of Rohingya displacement, the speaker contrasted the scattered settlements of Rohingya refugees in India across Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Bengal with the concentrated refugee camps in Bangladesh. In India, the decentralized settlement pattern, shaped by familial networks and informal mobility, complicates governance and aid distribution while simultaneously reflecting the interplay between refugee agency and structural constraints. By contrast, Bangladesh's policy of containment within camps reinforces bureaucratic control and limits refugees' ability to integrate or move beyond predefined spaces.

A key focus of the speaker's presentation was the growing reliance on biometric registration in refugee governance. Initially framed as a tool for aid distribution, biometric data collection has evolved into a mechanism of surveillance and control, raising ethical concerns about privacy, rights, and agency. She particularly underscored the gendered dimensions of biometric registration, arguing that Rohingya women—already subject to patriarchal restrictions face additional vulnerabilities as biometric systems reinforce existing social hierarchies and deepen marginalization. While biometric registration offers visibility within humanitarian systems, it simultaneously functions as an instrument of exclusion, categorization, and restricted mobility.

### **4. SPEAKER 4: PROF. PAULA BANERJEE**

#### **Rohingya Displacement, Citizenship, and the Limits of International Engagement**

On the second day, Prof. Banerjee shifted her focus to the Rohingya crisis, examining the intersections of displacement, statelessness, and international governance. She critically assessed the failures of international institutions such as the UNHCR and ASEAN, arguing that their humanitarian frameworks remain insufficient in addressing the long-term political and legal challenges of statelessness. A key component of her presentation was a comparative analysis between the Palestinian and Rohingya refugee crises, illustrating how both communities have been denied fundamental rights and trapped in cycles of displacement.

She introduced the concept of "killing citizenship", referring to bureaucratic mechanisms that systematically erase refugee identity and deny legal recognition, reinforcing their status as perpetual outsiders. She also critiqued the policies of host states, particularly Bangladesh's repatriation efforts and its refusal to acknowledge the Rohingya as permanent residents. She

underscored how labeling Rohingya refugees as “People of Myanmar Origin” effectively absolves the Bangladeshi state of long-term responsibility, mirroring similar exclusionary policies in India, Malaysia, and Thailand. The relocation of Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, which she described as a form of containment rather than a sustainable solution, was cited as an example of state-led displacement governance that prioritizes control over protection.

Expanding on the broader geopolitical landscape, she examined the roles of China and India, both of whom wield significant diplomatic influence over Myanmar yet have remained strategically neutral. Despite having the capacity to intervene, she argued that their prioritization of economic and strategic interests has superseded humanitarian concerns. She emphasized that without sustained diplomatic engagement from regional powers, the Rohingya crisis will persist as an unresolved humanitarian catastrophe. Another critical aspect of her presentation was the role of biometric registration in refugee governance. While intended as a mechanism for aid distribution and identity management, she argued that it has increasingly become a tool for surveillance and exclusion.

She expressed concerns that biometric tracking disproportionately impacts women and reinforces existing structures of marginalization, rendering them even more vulnerable to state control. In her final remarks, Prof. Banerjee emphasized the urgency of shifting refugee governance beyond the paradigm of securitization and containment. She called for a regional approach that prioritizes mobility, economic integration, and legal protections, arguing that statelessness must be understood as a structural issue rather than a legal anomaly. She concluded with a powerful call to action, urging scholars, civil society organizations, and policymakers to rethink the current frameworks of refugee governance and develop strategies that center dignity, agency, and long-term inclusion. Without such interventions, she warned, the Rohingya crisis like the Palestinian displacement will become a generational catastrophe with no viable resolution.

## **5. SPEAKER: PROF. PURWO SANTOSO**

### **Statelessness, Ethical Citizenship, and the Politics of Refugee Governance**

Professor Purwo Santoso offered a critical examination of contemporary governance, arguing that the state’s treatment of stateless populations reflects an ethical failure rooted in bureaucratic rigidity and administrative exclusion. He introduced the concept of “administrative citizenry”, wherein citizenship has been reduced to bureaucratic validation, neglecting the inherent human dignity of individuals. This reduction, which he termed “killing citizenship”, underscored how states prioritize administrative procedures over their fundamental responsibility to protect marginalized communities, particularly refugees. The speaker emphasized that legal and bureaucratic mechanisms, often rigid and exclusionary, have rendered refugee inclusion structurally improbable, particularly in Southeast Asian states like Indonesia, which have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. As a response, he advocated for alternative governance models centered on ethical responsibility, social solidarity, and decentralized humanitarian action.





Using Indonesia as a case study, the speaker illustrated how localized humanitarian engagement has enabled the formation of informal refugee support networks, often facilitated by religious institutions and grassroots organizations. He highlighted the role of Islamic charities and zakat as critical humanitarian mechanisms that bypass legal barriers, demonstrating how decentralized refugee assistance operates despite the absence of formal recognition. The speaker introduced the concept of “citizenry in practice”, arguing that even without legal status, refugees integrate into local communities through informal economic participation and social networks. Over time, such adaptive approaches establish de facto protection mechanisms, illustrating the viability of community-driven solutions over state-centric governance models. However, he also pointed to the broader ethical crisis in governance, noting that many states neglect not only stateless populations but also long-term residents and marginalized citizens, reinforcing exclusionary nationalist paradigms at the expense of inclusive governance.

Expanding his critique to border governance, the speaker analyzed restrictive migration policies, highlighting their role in pushing refugees into informal migration pathways and exacerbating vulnerability to exploitation. He introduced the concepts of state-controlled migration (“white trafficking”) and illicit smuggling networks (“black trafficking”), illustrating how rigid border policies often fuel exploitative migration systems rather than preventing them. Rather than reinforcing security-driven enforcement, he called for a reorientation of migration governance that prioritizes human dignity, safety, and ethical responsibility. The speaker also critiqued the depoliticization of refugee crises, arguing that refugee governance is often framed as a humanitarian issue rather than a political one. This framing, he suggested, relegates displacement to logistical management by international organizations while ignoring its root causes, structural violence, and geopolitical dimensions. He criticized the absence of regional and global leadership, noting that the lack of state accountability exacerbates the precarity of stateless communities.

In addressing data governance and refugee surveillance, the speaker critiqued how states manipulate discrepancies in refugee data to evade accountability. While big data was initially introduced as a tool for empowerment, it has increasingly become a mechanism of exclusion, surveillance, and structural violence. He drew comparisons between Palestinian and Rohingya refugees, emphasizing their generational displacement and the global failure to provide long-term solutions. The speaker also interrogated naturalization policies, warning that while they offer potential pathways to legal recognition, they risk erasing refugee identities and histories. The persistence of statelessness, he argued, is a failure of global governance to address displacement at its root.

As a path forward, the speaker proposed strengthening humanitarian and social movements by formalizing community-driven refugee assistance, engaging religious institutions, and fostering collaboration between local governments, NGOs, and international organizations. He stressed the importance of sustaining informal refugee protection systems, developing flexible legal frameworks for access to basic services, and promoting initiatives that encourage host community acceptance.

Additionally, he called for a reassessment of border and migration policies to incorporate ethical and sustainable approaches, ensuring safe migration pathways and preventing exploitation within irregular migration networks. In his concluding remarks, Professor Purwo Santoso introduced the vision of “planetary citizenship”, advocating for a global perspective that transcends national borders and reimagines citizenship as an ethical, humanity-centered commitment. He integrated this perspective with universal human rights and climate justice, urging policymakers, scholars, and civil society to move beyond exclusionary nationalism and rethink governance from a holistic, inclusive, and ethical standpoint. His presentation called for a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of governance, migration, and statelessness, challenging state-centric paradigms and reinforcing the urgency of human-centered policy interventions.

## 6. SPEAKER: DR. MIKIO OISHI

### **Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia, Legal Exclusion, and the Politics of Integration**

Dr. Mikio Oishi provided a critical examination of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Malaysia, analyzing the historical, socio-political, and economic factors that shape their precarious existence. He underscored Malaysia's complex migration landscape, which has been shaped by its colonial past, regional labor migration patterns, and shifting state policies toward migrant communities. While Malaysia has long been a hub for both economic migrants and refugees, its approach to different migrant groups has been highly inconsistent, reflecting political considerations, economic demands, and racialized perceptions of belonging. The speaker emphasized that the Rohingya experience in Malaysia is uniquely characterized by severe legal precarity, economic hardship, and systemic exclusion, making them one of the most vulnerable refugee communities in the country. The absence of legal status remains the most pressing challenge for the Rohingya in Malaysia. As Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the state does not formally recognize refugees, leaving the Rohingya classified as illegal migrants despite UNHCR registration. This status exposes them to constant risks of detention, deportation, and legal persecution, creating an environment of perpetual fear and insecurity. Without official recognition, Rohingya refugees are denied access to formal employment, public healthcare, and education, forcing them into informal, low-wage labor markets where they are highly susceptible to exploitation and abuse. The speaker noted that while some UNHCR-registered Rohingya benefit from limited protections, these do not translate into full legal safeguards, leaving many in a state of legal limbo.

Beyond legal precarity, the economic vulnerabilities of Rohingya refugees are deeply entrenched. The absence of work permits relegates them to informal and unstable jobs, particularly in construction, agriculture, and domestic work, where wages are low and protections nonexistent. Many employers exploit their lack of legal status, paying them below-market wages and threatening them with police reporting or deportation if they attempt to demand better working conditions. The lack of access to education further limits economic mobility, ensuring that younger generations remain trapped in cycles of poverty and informal labor. The speaker highlighted that Rohingya women face compounded vulnerabilities, as they are often excluded from both economic opportunities and social services, due to patriarchal norms within their communities and discriminatory state policies.



In addition to legal and economic exclusion, widespread discrimination and xenophobic sentiments further marginalize Rohingya refugees. Malaysia's ethnic and political landscape, which privileges Malay-Muslim identity while restricting non-citizen rights, has contributed to hostile attitudes toward foreign migrants and refugees. Although the Rohingya share religious ties with the Malay majority, they are often framed as outsiders who threaten social cohesion and economic stability. The speaker noted that anti-refugee rhetoric in Malaysia has been amplified by political discourse,

with some leaders vilifying the Rohingya as a burden on national resources, reinforcing negative stereotypes and social exclusion. The lack of formal refugee protections has made it easy for xenophobic narratives to persist, further justifying harsh state policies and public hostility toward the Rohingya.

Drawing comparisons with other migrant and refugee groups in Malaysia, the speaker illustrated how legal recognition, economic participation, and cultural affinity have shaped integration outcomes. Achenese refugees, for instance, benefited from temporary protection and shared cultural ties, allowing them to integrate with less resistance. Undocumented migrants in Sabah gained partial recognition through economic contributions, as their labor was deemed essential to local industries. Pattani Malays, who share ethnic and religious connections with Malaysia's majority population, have assimilated more smoothly, enjoying greater social acceptance despite their non-citizen status. Bangladeshi migrants, despite arriving as low-wage laborers, have managed to improve their socio-economic standing through entrepreneurship and informal economic networks. The speaker argued that these cases demonstrate the central role of legal status, economic agency, and cultural acceptance in determining refugee integration outcomes, reinforcing the Rohingya's disadvantage due to their exclusion from all three areas. The speaker proposed a range of policy recommendations aimed at improving Rohingya refugees' conditions and broader migration governance in Malaysia. He called for the implementation of temporary protection schemes that would grant Rohingya refugees the right to work legally, recognizing that economic participation is central to stability and self-reliance. He stressed that without legal work permits, Rohingya will remain trapped in exploitative labor conditions, reinforcing their marginalization. Expanding access to education and healthcare was identified as a critical priority, particularly for Rohingya children and women, whose exclusion from basic services exacerbates generational poverty and inequality. The speaker also underscored the importance of community engagement initiatives and public awareness campaigns, arguing that xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment can be challenged through education and social integration programs.

Beyond domestic policy reforms, the speaker stressed the need for regional and international cooperation in addressing the Rohingya crisis in Malaysia. He called for closer collaboration between the Malaysian government and UNHCR, urging Malaysia to move beyond ad-hoc refugee policies and adopt a structured, rights-based approach to refugee management. The ASEAN framework was highlighted as a potential mechanism for collective action, particularly as Malaysia prepares to assume the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. He argued that Malaysia could leverage this leadership role to push for a more coordinated regional refugee governance strategy, engaging with neighboring states and international stakeholders to develop long-term solutions. The speaker emphasized that while Malaysia's reluctance to formalize refugee protections has deep historical and political roots, a regional approach could provide a diplomatic pathway toward policy change. In his concluding remarks, Dr. Mikio Oishi emphasized that while Rohingya refugees in Malaysia face entrenched legal, economic, and social barriers, lessons from other migrant communities demonstrate that well-structured policies can significantly improve their conditions. He reiterated that legal recognition, economic inclusion, and cultural integration are pivotal to ensuring both the well-being of refugees and broader societal stability. The speaker called for a coordinated effort among the Malaysian government, civil society, and international organizations to advance sustainable solutions to the ongoing crisis, arguing that effective refugee governance is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a political necessity for regional stability. He concluded by stressing that the Rohingya crisis should not be framed as a burden but as an opportunity for Malaysia to demonstrate leadership in shaping a more inclusive and forward-thinking migration policy within ASEAN and beyond.

## 7. SPEAKER 7: DR. YUNiar PARAMITA SARI

### Policy Response to Rohingya Refugees and Stateless Persons

Ms. Yuniar Paramita Sari, representing Migrasia, an NGO focused on human trafficking and labor exploitation, delivered a comprehensive analysis of ASEAN's policy responses to refugees and stateless persons, with a particular focus on the Rohingya crisis. Her presentation critically examined ASEAN's structural limitations, emphasizing that the principle of noninterference has severely restricted regional action, preventing any meaningful intervention in Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya. She argued that while ASEAN has been paralyzed by state sovereignty concerns, local communities and grassroots organizations have stepped in to provide humanitarian assistance, filling the gaps left by ineffective state policies.

The speaker provided a historical overview of the Rohingya refugee crisis, highlighting a series of major events that have shaped the displacement of Rohingya populations across Southeast Asia. She identified the 2015 maritime refugee crisis, during which thousands of Rohingya were stranded at sea, refused entry by regional states, and subjected to human trafficking networks. This was followed by escalating violence in 2016 and the mass exodus in August 2017, when over 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee Myanmar due to military-led operations that have since been widely described as ethnic cleansing or genocide. The speaker critiqued ASEAN's slow and largely ineffective response, noting that the bloc's structural commitment to noninterference in member states' internal affairs has rendered it unable to take decisive action. Myanmar's repeated resistance to international scrutiny has effectively blocked any attempt at collective action, leaving ASEAN without a clear strategy or policy framework for addressing the crisis.



She further elaborated on ASEAN's institutional weaknesses, arguing that the organization's strict adherence to state sovereignty has significantly constrained humanitarian intervention efforts. The consensus-based decision-making process, which requires unanimous agreement among all member states, has made it nearly impossible to take action on the Rohingya crisis, given Myanmar's outright opposition to external involvement. This structural flaw, she argued, not only prevents ASEAN from addressing human rights violations but also limits its ability to develop a coordinated refugee policy. She assessed ASEAN's existing human rights mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC),

concluding that these bodies have been largely ineffective in resolving the crisis due to ASEAN's noninterference doctrine. The failure of ASEAN's human rights mechanisms to hold Myanmar accountable, she suggested, reflects a deeper crisis in regional governance, wherein diplomatic inertia and political sensitivities have taken precedence over human rights commitments.

Turning to Indonesia's approach to refugee governance, the speaker examined the legal and policy frameworks that shape its response to displaced populations. She emphasized that Indonesia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, meaning that it does not have a dedicated refugee protection system and instead manages refugee issues through immigration laws. She assessed Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016, which formally recognized refugees within Indonesian law but largely as a security concern rather than a humanitarian issue. This policy has reinforced detention-based refugee management, restricting freedom of movement and access to essential services. While UNHCR plays a role in conducting refugee status determination in Indonesia, its influence is severely limited by the country's restrictive policies, which prioritize containment over integration.

The speaker highlighted the social challenges associated with refugee governance in Indonesia, particularly public resistance to refugee inclusion. She pointed out that xenophobic rhetoric and misinformation have fueled negative perceptions of refugees, complicating efforts to develop sustainable policies. She noted that in 2019, the Jakarta provincial government ceased providing food aid to refugees, shifting the burden to UNHCR, which has struggled to meet growing needs due to limited resources. This decision, she argued, reflects a broader pattern across ASEAN member states, where governments increasingly rely on international organizations to manage refugee populations without establishing national legal frameworks for protection. Despite state inaction, the speaker emphasized the critical role of local communities and grassroots organizations in providing humanitarian assistance. She cited Aceh as a key example of localized refugee protection efforts, where residents have voluntarily provided food, shelter, and support to Rohingya refugees.

These efforts, she argued, are rooted in local cultural values and Islamic traditions of hospitality, demonstrating that community-driven humanitarian initiatives can be an effective complement to state responses. The Acehese response provides a model for other ASEAN countries, illustrating how local engagement can mitigate some of the harshest effects of state inaction. The speaker then presented policy recommendations, advocating for a fundamental shift in ASEAN's refugee governance approach. She called for a humanitarian-centered framework that allows willing ASEAN member states to take action on refugee protection, regardless of Myanmar's opposition. She emphasized the need to strengthen national refugee frameworks within ASEAN countries, including reducing reliance on detention-based policies and expanding legal pathways for integration, such as work permits and community accommodation models.

She also underscored the importance of empowering local communities, calling for greater investment in grassroots initiatives that provide direct support to refugees. The speaker's final recommendations focused on the urgent need for ASEAN to reassess its approach to statelessness and displacement. She proposed that ASEAN develop a regional refugee protection framework that balances state sovereignty with humanitarian obligations, ensuring that protection mechanisms exist even in the absence of formal legal commitments from all member states. Additionally, she emphasized the role of civil society and grassroots organizations in shaping more sustainable refugee protection models, arguing that bottom-up approaches could be a more viable and effective policy direction for refugee governance in Southeast Asia.

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Yuniar Paramita Sari reflected on the broader implications of ASEAN's inaction on the Rohingya crisis, questioning whether ASEAN's failure to intervene reflects a deeper structural weakness in regional governance. She argued that ASEAN's reliance



on a state-centric approach has left it unprepared to handle large-scale displacement, reinforcing diplomatic inertia and policy stagnation. She also noted that the international community has largely failed to exert meaningful pressure on ASEAN to adopt a more proactive stance, further complicating the prospects for long-term solutions. The session concluded with a discussion on whether ASEAN's inaction should be viewed as a sign of institutional collapse, or whether alternative pathways through civil society, local governance, and grassroots humanitarian initiatives could offer a more effective and sustainable solution to refugee protection in the region

## **8. SPEAKER 8: CHRIS LEWA**

### **The Rohingya Crisis, Statelessness, and the Future of Regional Engagement**

Chris Lewa, Consultant and Coordinator of the Arakan Project, provided a detailed and incisive analysis of the Rohingya crisis, its legal and historical roots, and the ongoing challenges of statelessness and displacement. Drawing on over 25 years of experience in research, documentation, and advocacy on Rohingya rights, she contextualized the crisis within a broader framework of exclusionary state policies, militarized violence, and international diplomatic failures. Through her work at the Arakan Project, Lewa has played a pivotal role in tracking migration trends, documenting human rights abuses, and advocating for policy reforms at regional and international levels.

Her presentation underscored that without legal recognition and political inclusion, the Rohingya will remain trapped in cycles of displacement, precarity, and human rights violations. She traced the historical foundations of Rohingya statelessness, emphasizing that the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law was a turning point in the deliberate disenfranchisement of the Rohingya, rendering them stateless and systematically excluding them from political, economic, and social participation. She highlighted that this law restricted their freedom of movement, imposed reproductive limitations, and denied them access to education, healthcare, and employment, reinforcing a structure of institutionalized exclusion. These legal barriers, combined with decades of state-sponsored discrimination and violence, have left the Rohingya in a permanent state of vulnerability, deprived of fundamental rights.

The speaker explored the political and ethnic dynamics of Rakhine State, where tensions between the Myanmar military, the Rakhine Buddhist community, and the Rohingya Muslim population have fueled recurring cycles of violence and forced displacement. She analyzed the impact of the 2012 communal riots, which marked a major shift toward the forced segregation of Rohingya communities into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. By 2017, tensions culminated in a brutal military crackdown, leading to the mass exodus of over 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. She detailed how the Myanmar military deliberately destroyed Rohingya villages, erased property records, and burned settlements, making future repatriation increasingly difficult. Lewa was particularly critical of ASEAN's role in the crisis, arguing that ASEAN's adherence to noninterference and consensus-based decision-making has rendered it incapable of responding effectively.

She noted that Myanmar's ability to veto regional interventions has prevented ASEAN from developing a unified refugee protection policy, leaving the crisis to be managed by individual host states without a collective response. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and other ASEAN human rights mechanisms, she argued, have been largely symbolic, failing to hold Myanmar accountable or develop mechanisms for refugee protection. Given ASEAN's limitations, Lewa advocated for a broader engagement strategy, emphasizing the

importance of working with nonstate actors such as the Arakan Army (AA), which now controls large parts of Rakhine State. She argued that regional and international stakeholders must recognize the shifting power dynamics in Myanmar and engage not only with the central government but also with local armed groups, humanitarian organizations, and civil society actors. She pointed to grassroots movements in Bangladesh and Thailand, which have played a crucial role in providing direct humanitarian aid to displaced Rohingya populations, often compensating for state-level inaction.

Examining the situation in Bangladesh, Lewa noted that while Bangladesh initially welcomed the Rohingya, the increasing securitization of refugee camps, restrictions on movement, and growing local frustrations have shifted the government's stance toward repatriation. She highlighted the deteriorating conditions in Cox's Bazar, where rising security concerns, food shortages, and declining international funding have created an atmosphere of desperation among Rohingya refugees. The Bangladeshi government's reluctance to integrate Rohingya refugees has exacerbated their vulnerability, with limited legal protections and no clear pathways to long-term stability. Lewa stressed that statelessness must be at the core of any long-term resolution to the crisis. She argued that without citizenship or legal recognition, Rohingya refugees will remain permanently displaced and excluded from political, economic, and social life. She called for greater international pressure on Myanmar to amend its citizenship laws while simultaneously urging host countries to explore legal pathways for Rohingya recognition.

She also underscored the need for immediate humanitarian access in Rakhine State, where military-imposed blockades have prevented aid organizations from reaching displaced Rohingya communities. The speaker proposed several policy recommendations to address these challenges. She urged ASEAN to move beyond its state-centric approach by supporting independent initiatives that bypass Myanmar's obstructionist stance, working directly with UN agencies, humanitarian organizations, and local civil society actors to enhance refugee protection. She emphasized that diplomatic engagement with the Arakan Army and other nonstate actors is essential for improving humanitarian access and facilitating potential repatriation efforts. She also argued that regional frameworks must incorporate statelessness solutions, including alternative legal pathways for Rohingya refugees in host countries.

In her concluding remarks, Chris Lewa presented a bleak but realistic assessment of the Rohingya crisis, emphasizing that with Myanmar's military still in power and the Arakan Army gaining influence, the immediate prospects for voluntary repatriation remain bleak. She warned that the Rohingya remain in a state of legal and political limbo, with no clear resolution in sight. The failure of both regional and international actors to address statelessness, she argued, has reinforced the Rohingya's marginalization and prolonged their displacement. She urged the international community to broaden its engagement, advocating for a shift away from traditional state-centered diplomacy toward more flexible, multi-actor approaches that recognize the evolving power dynamics within Myanmar. The session concluded with a discussion on whether ASEAN's passive stance reflects a deeper institutional crisis or whether alternative, grassroots-driven refugee governance models could offer a more effective path forward.

## **9. DISCUSSION: MS. SYIFA S NASUTION**

### **The Role of Public Awareness and Social Integration in Refugee Acceptance**

Ms. Syifa Salsabila, an intern at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), provided key insights into the critical role of public awareness and social integration in shaping refugee acceptance and

inclusion. She emphasized that policy shifts alone are insufficient if public perceptions remain rooted in fear, misinformation, or xenophobia, as negative sentiment toward refugees often obstructs progressive policy implementation. In many host countries, particularly in Indonesia, where communal identities shape national discourse, public perception plays a significant role in influencing government policies on migration and displacement. However, she highlighted that low literacy rates, limited awareness, and widespread misinformation have contributed to a growing resistance to refugee inclusion, creating social and political barriers to long-term integration efforts. Ms. Syifa underscored that fostering mutual understanding between refugees and host communities is essential for long-term social cohesion and economic integration. Without targeted efforts to bridge societal divisions and counter misinformation, displaced populations risk further marginalization and exclusion. To address these challenges, she proposed a multi-pronged approach that includes:

- Community-driven engagement programs that facilitate direct interactions between refugees and host communities, fostering dialogue, trust, and cultural exchange.
- Digital awareness campaigns to counteract misinformation, educate the public on refugee rights, and highlight refugees' economic and social contributions.
- Cultural adaptation initiatives designed to help refugees navigate their new social environments, while also encouraging host communities to recognize and respect the cultural diversity refugees bring.

She further emphasized the role of local media and educational institutions in shaping public narratives around migration and displacement. By incorporating refugee-related content into school curricula, encouraging responsible media coverage, and facilitating informed public discussions, host societies can cultivate a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of refugee issues. These efforts, she argued, are crucial in shifting societal attitudes from viewing refugees as burdens to recognizing them as active and valuable members of society who can contribute economically, socially, and culturally.

Ms. Syifa concluded by reiterating that the success of refugee integration efforts depends not only on policy frameworks but also on the willingness of host communities to embrace displaced populations. Without broad-based public support and proactive awareness initiatives, even the most progressive refugee policies risk being undermined by societal resistance. She called for collaborative action between governments, civil society, and media institutions to foster inclusive narratives and promote long-term social integration as a cornerstone of sustainable refugee governance.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR REFUGEE GOVERNANCE**

Moderating the sessions across both days, Roula El Rifai provided a strategic and analytical framework for understanding ASEAN's role in addressing refugee crises, particularly in relation to Myanmar. Her insights underscored that ASEAN's long-standing commitment to noninterference has severely restricted its ability to engage meaningfully in refugee protection and humanitarian intervention, leaving regional displacement challenges largely unaddressed at a policy level. However, she pointed to opportunities for diplomatic engagement through informal platforms, such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat, highlighting the potential for high-level dialogues, increased bilateral and multilateral pressure on Myanmar, and strengthened collaboration with civil society organizations to develop alternative refugee governance strategies. She emphasized that regional diplomacy must be central to any long-term approach to

displacement governance, given that forced migration in Southeast Asia is not just a humanitarian crisis but also a structural and political issue requiring multilateral cooperation.

Throughout the discussions, a clear consensus emerged on the need for a paradigm shift in refugee governance one that moves beyond reactive, short-term humanitarian interventions toward sustainable, multi-stakeholder strategies. Refugee protection cannot be treated as a siloed humanitarian concern but must be integrated into national and regional frameworks on labor, migration, and development. The discussions reinforced that forced displacement is no longer a temporary phenomenon; rather, it is a protracted reality that demands structural policy solutions. This shift requires recognizing refugees as active participants in host economies and societies, rather than as passive recipients of aid. One of the key issues highlighted was the disconnect between refugee protection mechanisms and labor migration policies in ASEAN states.

Despite 70% of refugees being of working age, restrictive labor policies exclude them from formal employment opportunities, forcing them into precarious, informal jobs without legal protections. Bridging this policy gap is essential for reducing economic dependency, promoting self-sufficiency, and fostering inclusive growth. Discussions centered on developing a dual-track policy approach that ensures both legal protections under international law and access to labor rights, employment, and social services. By allowing refugees to participate in the economy, while maintaining their legal status and rights, host countries can turn forced displacement from a humanitarian burden into an opportunity for economic resilience. Another crucial dimension explored was public awareness and social integration, particularly in communal societies, where public perception shapes national policies. Negative sentiment toward refugees driven by misinformation, xenophobia, and economic anxieties—continues to pose challenges to refugee acceptance.

Public discourse must therefore be actively shaped through strategic awareness campaigns, community engagement programs, and cultural exchange initiatives that promote mutual understanding between refugees and host communities. The discussions emphasized that building social cohesion is as important as enacting legal protections, as no policy can be effectively implemented without public buy-in and societal support. ASEAN's response to forced displacement remains constrained by its institutional limitations, yet the discussions revealed potential entry points for a more active and constructive role in refugee governance. While ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making and state-centric approach have hindered collective action, informal diplomatic mechanisms offer a way forward. By engaging in flexible diplomatic interventions, such as high-level informal dialogues and multi-stakeholder engagement efforts, ASEAN can leverage its regional influence to advocate for sustainable refugee policies. Strengthening civil society participation, collaborating with humanitarian organizations, and adopting global best practices in refugee governance were among the recommendations made for enhancing ASEAN's diplomatic and policy capacity in addressing displacement challenges.

Beyond governments, the role of the private sector was identified as a critical but underutilized resource in refugee governance. Private businesses, multinational corporations, and local enterprises can play a key role in economic integration through vocational training, employment initiatives, and microfinance opportunities for refugees. Expanding corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to support refugee education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship could create long-term solutions beyond traditional humanitarian aid models. Additionally, faith-based organizations, community networks, and educational institutions were recognized as essential actors in facilitating refugee inclusion and advocating for legal recognition. At the heart of the

discussions was the recognition that sustainable refugee governance requires a multi-sectoral response that combines humanitarian aid, economic policy, and diplomatic strategy. The following key takeaways emerged:

- Developing an integrated policy framework that bridges refugee protection with labor migration policies, ensuring that refugees can access legal employment while maintaining their rights under international law.
- Strengthening public awareness and community engagement initiatives to counter misinformation, challenge xenophobic narratives, and foster social acceptance.
- Enhancing ASEAN's role in regional refugee diplomacy, utilizing informal but strategic diplomatic channels to facilitate dialogue, influence policy shifts, and coordinate regional approaches to forced migration.
- Encouraging private sector involvement in vocational training, employment generation, and CSR-driven refugee support programs to create long-term economic solutions for displaced communities.

The event concluded with a strong consensus that refugee protection must be redefined as a rights-based, economically inclusive, and diplomatically coordinated effort. The future of displacement governance in Southeast Asia depends on the willingness of governments, civil society, businesses, and regional organizations to engage in solutions that move beyond emergency aid toward long-term resilience-building. As Roula El Rifai's moderation consistently emphasized, refugee governance must not be seen merely as a crisis response but as a long-term structural commitment to dignity, rights, and integration. The challenge ahead lies in translating these discussions into actionable policies that bridge the gap between humanitarian principles and political realities, ensuring that displaced populations are not left in perpetual limbo but are given the opportunity to rebuild their lives with security, dignity, and agency.



## DOCUMENTATIONS





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