

## Cultural Background: BURMA

*(This profile is about students from Burma who are ethnically Burman. The majority of refugees in the USA from Burma are ethnically Karen, Karenni, or Rohingya - see separate background profiles for these groups.)*



## Language

Burmese

## Teaching in the Classroom

While very little funding is given to education, individuals tend to highly value education and place teachers in positions of utmost respect. Education in Burma is heavily politicized-the curricula are controlled by the government, and schooling is often used to impose ethnic discrimination. Ethnic peoples are not allowed to learn their own language and culture. The military government used education as a tool to prevent students from learning how to rebel. Today education is still controlled by the government at all levels.

Children in rural areas or from poor families are less likely to have attended school. Approximately 40% of children do not attend school and about 75% do not complete their primary education [Thein Lwin, 2003]. Monastic schools provide some education for low-income families.

Schools are typically somewhat corrupt. Many teachers have not had adequate training and will accept bribes. Teachers are often authoritative and students are expected to show obedience and respect. Teaching in most classrooms is dominated by "call and response" styles, with very limited interaction between students and teacher. Students are expected to memorize facts and will likely have little understanding of critical thinking.

Among Burmese-Americans, enrollment in higher education shows almost equal numbers of females and males.

## **Family/School Engagement**

Traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named Htay Maung might have a wife named Win Swe Myint and two children named Cho Zin Nwe and Than Tut. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in Western countries.

Students in your classroom who are ethnically Burman may have parents who experienced severe political persecution, though they themselves may have been born in the USA or been very young when their families came to the USA. Literacy rates of adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the USA are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

Respect for elders is important: Younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect. Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person.

Don't touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body. Treat Buddhist monks and monk imagery and objects with respect. For example, one would not normally place objects above a Buddha image.

Burmese tend to be reserved until friendships are formed. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

The family, both immediate and extended, is the most important social unit in Burman life. Uncles, aunts, and cousins may live together under extended family arrangements. The mother usually takes care of the daily chores, helped by daughters or unmarried sisters. Males have priority - they wield greater authority, and are shown deference. Grandparents living with the family are also shown deference.