

Cultural background: KARENNI (Burma/Thailand)

*(Karenni refugee students from Burma (Myanmar and/or Thailand)*

*The Karenni live in Karenni State, and thousands are in refugee camps in Thailand.*



## Language

Karenni, Burmese, and English

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s.

Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, with some of the most well-known being the Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Rohinyan, and Mon.

## Teaching in the Classroom

All camps have primary and, to a lesser extent, middle or high schools. Most students in camps attend schools because they are free. Teachers drawn from the refugee community are paid very modest salaries by nongovernmental organizations. Teachers are typically not trained. International volunteers may sometimes improve students' English levels but do not necessarily have long term positive impacts on the overall education system. Camp conditions - overcrowding, poor facilities, a chronic shortage of books and equipment - make learning and teaching a challenge and contribute to relatively high dropout rates. Moreover, the lack of work opportunities has reduced enthusiasm for the value of education among older children since students who do graduate are often unable to work or attend university.



## Family /School Engagement

Karennis are not likely to ask for help, even if they need it. It will help families if you can provide referrals to community agencies that provide schools supplies etc., but be sure to explain these resources are available to any family and that you are not singling out their student or family.

Karenni culture places a high value on respect for elders and duty to parents. Karenni tend to address one another by titles, such as "Auntie" or "Uncle." You can show respect for parents by addressing them this way, such as "Auntie Nui."

Karennis are very community- and family-focused. Community members are often thought of as extended family members. Karenni refugees in the USA continue to highly value their families and cultural heritage, and Karenni communities highly value their traditions and independence. One of the best ways to engage families is to create activities and after-school programs that promote traditional culture, such as asking community leaders to teach traditional dancing. It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

It is probable that, prior to the refugee camp, your Karenni families were involved in subsistence agriculture as a means of livelihood. Most Karennis are forest-dwelling people who farm and forage, and may raise livestock.

The Karenni are traditionally animists, many of whom have converted to Christianity but retain their original animist belief systems. These beliefs are based on the appeasement of spirits, which requires a variety of rituals and sacrifices. The Karenni believe that a person possesses a number of souls, *kla*, and that it is vitally important to retain the *kla*, which might flee for various reasons (in connection with a mental breakdown, for example).

Parents share responsibility for raising children and decision-making, but men typically communicate decisions to the public and are seen as the leaders of the family. Karenni men may be looked down upon or teased if they do not appear to be the leader of the wife. In the camps, however, women's groups play an important role. They advocate for women's concerns at the camp leadership level,



promote education and work opportunities for women, and provide support for the many vulnerable community members, such as orphans, widows, and the victims of domestic violence.