

## Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo



*Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Burmese refugees that you meet.*

### **Background: Burma, or Myanmar**

Burma, officially known as the Republic of Myanmar, is a small nation in Asia, bordering Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. For many years, the nation has suffered military dictatorship, inflicting violence and torture on various ethnic groups.

Burma is one of the most diverse countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> The largest ethnic groups, making up approximately 68% of the nation's population, are the Burmans, also called Bamar.<sup>2</sup> Other ethnic groups include the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Shan and Wa peoples.<sup>3</sup> There are over 500,000 individuals from Burma currently residing in refugee camps in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> America is the new home of thousands of refugees from Burma. This fact sheet focuses mainly on three of the largest ethnic groups: Burman, Karen, and Chin.

## Refugees in Buffalo

Since 2003, New York State has resettled 11,362 refugees from Burma, including 1,314 in the 2013 fiscal year.

The first movement of refugees from Burma to Buffalo began approximately 15 years ago, around 2000.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, a significant influx arrived, and by 2007 there was a well-established community here in Buffalo, estimated at around 8,000 to 10,000 refugees.<sup>6</sup>

One of the significant communities of Burmese ethnic groups living in Buffalo is the Karen. Although different groups of Karen individuals may have a common language, there are various groups within the Karen-speaking Burmese community, and ethnic conflicts exist among the groups. Similarly, religious differences cause divides among these groups.<sup>7</sup>

The Burmese population in Buffalo is one of the largest refugee groups in the area. There are several reasons that this population is rapidly growing:

- Four major resettlements are active in Buffalo
- The low costs of living and housing in Buffalo make it a viable place to start a life in the U.S.
- Because of the large community of Burmese individuals already living here, many of the recently migrated individuals have relocated from within the US to be a part of this community of support

## Cultural Attributes

### *Religious Traditions and Belief Systems*

Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion in Burma. There is a small percentage of Karen peoples that have converted to Protestant Christianity, as well as a small Islamic population.<sup>8</sup> Animistic traditions are also represented, especially among the Chin and Burman ethnic groups.

In Buffalo, the Muslim Burmese communities have settled mostly on the East Side and the Buddhist community mostly on Buffalo's West Side, with little interaction between the two.<sup>9</sup>

### *Social and Familial Values*

Family plays an important role among most Burman ethnic groups. Roles and responsibilities in the household are typically taken on by the female, although opportunities for education and career advancement are nearly equal among men and women.<sup>10</sup> Burmese ethnic groups tend to emphasize harmony, cooperation, and respect for elders rather than material goods and individual gain.<sup>11</sup>

In general, some rules of polite behavior among Burman include:<sup>12</sup>

- Treat elders and Buddhist monks with deep respect
- Do not tower over people senior to yourself
- Do not point your feet toward a senior
- Do not touch people on the head
- Use both hands to give or receive from an older person
- Do not show anger, even in most frustrating situations
- At times, direct, assertive behavior could be considered rude

The culture of the Karen peoples, while similar to the Burman in many ways, also has some unique gestures and expectations of polite behavior. Some of these include:<sup>13</sup>

- Avoid walking in front of others
- If you accidentally pick something up that belongs to another, apologize
- Saying ‘no’ to a question when an affirmative is expected is a way to be modest

The Chin culture also has additional gestures of respect:<sup>14</sup>

- Looking directly into the eye of a speaker is considered an act of challenge
- Walking with body bent at waist shows respect, as does crossing both arms across the body and interlocking them.

### *Education, Literacy and Language*

Many Burmese are familiar with the English language. The desire to acquire the language is widespread, although difficulties in pronunciation, stress, and grammar are not uncommon in learning English.<sup>15</sup>

First names and surnames may cause confusion in filling out American forms. Burman peoples do not have family names or surnames, instead their given name consists of two syllables. In filling out forms in America, Burman individuals frequently use the first syllable as their first name and the second syllable as their surname.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Karen people typically use names and nicknames but have no formal indication of “first name” and “surname”.

All Burmese ethnic groups use tonal languages, in which distinctions in meaning are indicated with pitch and voice quality. Slight differences in sound, nearly unidentifiable to the English speaker’s ears, indicate different meanings.

Karen individuals who have lived in close proximity to the ethnic Burman most likely understand and speak Burmese, the national language of Burma and the mother tongue of the Burmans, but the native language spoken by 70% of Karen peoples is Sgaw Karen (the remaining 30% speak the Pwo Karen dialect).<sup>17</sup>

English is taught in urban schools among the Chin peoples. The familiarity with the Roman alphabet is helpful in learning English, but challenges occur with stress and pitch, as well as

English verb agreement. Chin people who come from rural areas will likely know little to no English.<sup>18</sup>

## Medical Information

Although Buddhism is the most common religion among all three groups, animistic beliefs are prevalent and have substantial influence on healthcare practices. Animistic beliefs indicate that the health of a person is controlled by the four elements: fire, water, air and earth. Imbalances in these cause illness and disease. Therefore, herbal medicine is important, and many individuals may still prefer traditional healing practices to Western medicine.<sup>19</sup> Individuals tend to focus on addressing symptoms rather than underlying issues. By and large, there is unfamiliarity with preventative health care. For example, Karen peoples may confuse vitamins and medicine, as these are used in the same manner within the Karen culture.<sup>20</sup>

For the various ethnic groups, Western medicine may cause confusion.<sup>21</sup> Karen peoples who have come from refugee camps are typically more familiar with Western medicine and clinical healthcare, but Karen peoples also tend to be private about their health concerns.

There is little to no sex education in Burma. Karen mothers often prefer home births with midwives, as this approach is more familiar than medical hospital births. Unfortunately, some Karen women experienced forced sterilization in hospitals in Thailand, increasing their distrust of hospital births.<sup>22</sup>

Chin mothers often have childbirth performed in hospitals, especially if they live in an urban area of Burma<sup>23</sup>. Those from rural areas are typically more comfortable with home-births assisted by a mid-wife.

Due to the lack of sex education, contraceptives and child spacing are topics that Chin peoples will likely be unfamiliar with. Providers must be prepared to educate about these topics. Use of specific (not open-ended) questions is recommended, as these are sensitive topics.

Chin peoples have three common child-rearing practices that may be alarming if not completely understood by American service providers.<sup>24</sup> Coining involves heating oil and rubbing it with a coin until the skin turns red. This may be used to treat illness, headache or coughs. Occasionally it is used by parents to discipline children. Cupping involves the use of fire to heat a cup which is then placed on the skin to create a vacuum. The vacuum effect releases muscle tension; however, this process may cause burns or swelling.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Chin parents may also use the “finger prick” when a child is misbehaving or ill. It is believed that this prick will release the “bad blood.”<sup>26</sup> The Chin people may also be unfamiliar with vaccinations, and the vaccination status of refugee children will likely be unknown.

Common medical problems that occur among these ethnic groups during the adjustment to America include: intestinal issues, Hepatitis, tuberculosis, thalassemia, and malaria. It is recommended that a caseworker be present with individuals during medical appointments due to the confusion that may occur as a result of cultural differences.

## **Resettlement Experiences and Challenges**

**In working with refugees of any culture, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, often due to experiences of torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.**

Most of the Burmese refugees had little urban experience prior coming to the US. Many of the activities that Americans take for granted will be entirely new experiences for them.

The concept of apartments is new to most individuals who are coming from rural settings. The habit of paying bills regularly may be an adjustment. Even those who have had experience with apartments are not accustomed to the size of homes and apartments here. It is not uncommon for families to all share one bedroom in an apartment.<sup>27</sup>

Burma is a tropical region. Buffalo's cold and snowy winters are a new experience. Therefore, learning the importance of blankets, socks and warm clothes is crucial.<sup>28</sup>

American competition, individualism, and uncouth language may be shocking, as the Burmese value cooperation, consensus and harmony. Many parents do not understand the dangers of neighborhoods in America and therefore allow their children to wander unsupervised. Similarly, a lack of understanding of trespassing laws, especially in regard to hunting and fishing, causes issues.<sup>29</sup>

Most Burmese refugees possess a strong work ethic. With little knowledge of labor laws they are at risk of exploitation in the American workplace. However, some find it difficult to obtain work that they are comfortable with, due to strong gender roles in their culture.<sup>30</sup>

In general, it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually.

## **Local Resources in Buffalo**

### **Burmese Community Services**

81 Albany St Buffalo, New York 14213

<http://www.burmesecs.org/>

*The Burmese Community Services, Inc. is established to assist the growing Burmese peoples and to provide services and resources.*

### **Burmese Community Support Center**

286 Lafayette Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14213

[Facebook.com/Burmese-Community-Support-Center](https://www.facebook.com/Burmese-Community-Support-Center)

*Client services support center for individuals from Burma new to the Buffalo area. Provides case management services 9-5 Monday through Friday.*

### **Chin Community of Buffalo, New York**

C/o Biak Lian, Chairman

194 W. Hazeltine Ave., Buffalo, NY 14213

[julianjesse07@gmail.com](mailto:julianjesse07@gmail.com) (716) 247-2203

### **Karen Society of Buffalo, Inc.**

931 Niagara Street Buffalo, NY 14213

[lawddaniel@gmail.com](mailto:lawddaniel@gmail.com) (716)538-9663

*Provides cultural and social support services to individuals living in Buffalo of ethnic Karen descent.*

### **Karenni Community of Buffalo**

Attn: Jackson Angelo

90 Wyndotte Ave., Lower Buffalo, NY 14209

[jacksonangelo.kncb@gmail.com](mailto:jacksonangelo.kncb@gmail.com) (716) 200-3062

### **Zomi Innkuan Buffalo (Zomi Community of Buffalo)**

145 Breckenridge Street, Apt. 1, Buffalo, NY 14213

[smungpi756@gmail.com](mailto:smungpi756@gmail.com) (716) 777-9761

### **Sun Restaurant**

1989 Niagara Street, Buffalo, NY 14207

[www.suncuisines.com](http://www.suncuisines.com) (716) 447-0202

*A family restaurant that serves Thai and Burmese Cuisine.*

### **The WASH Project**

417 Massachusetts Ave, Buffalo, NY 14213

[www.thewashproject.org](http://www.thewashproject.org) (716) 253-1068

*The WASH Project (Westside Art Strategy Happenings) is a community arts & resource center housed within a vibrant Laundromat in Buffalo, NY, owned by Zaw Win, a refugee from Burma.*

### **Annual Water festival hosted by the International Institute of Buffalo in April**

*Each April, some of the Burmese communities gather to celebrate the Burmese New Year which includes music, dance and friendly water splashing.*

### **WNY Muslim Association**

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

*WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.*

### **International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)**

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.iibuff.org (716)883-1900

*“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.*

### **Catholic Charities (CC)**

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

www.ccwny.org (716) 842-0270

*“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”*

### **Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)**

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214

www.jersbuffalo.org (716) 882-4963

*JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”*

### **Jewish Family Services (JFS)**

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.jfsbuffalo.org (716) 883-1914

*Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.*

### **Jericho Road Community Health Center**

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213

www.jrm-buffalo.org (716)-348-3000

*Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.*

### **Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)**

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203

(716)853-3087

*A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.*

## NOTES

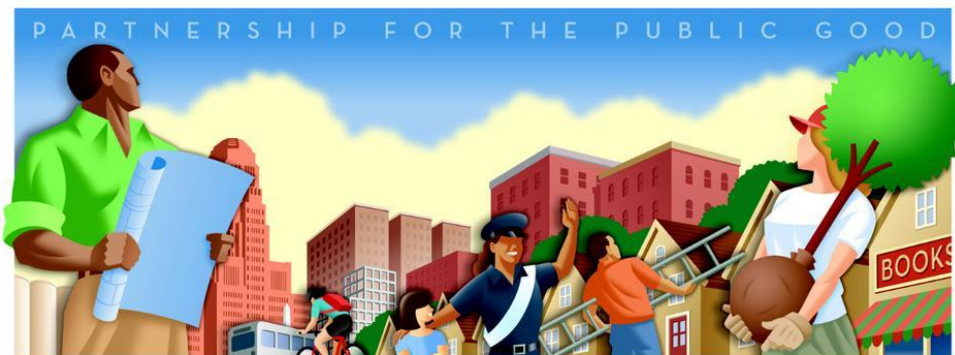
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- <sup>1</sup> "Ethnic Diversity." Ethnic Diversity. January 1, 2013. Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://www.allburmarefugees.org/ethnic-diversity>.
- <sup>2</sup> Id.
- <sup>3</sup> Id.
- <sup>4</sup> "Burmese Refugees in Thailand." U.S. Department of State. Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/policyissues/issues/protracted/situations/183982.htm>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ba Zahn Lin, interview by author, Buffalo, NY, October 17, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Id.
- <sup>7</sup> Id.
- <sup>8</sup> Barron, Sandy, John Okell, Saw Myat Yin, Kenneth VanBik, Arthur Swain, Emma Larkin, Anna Allot, and Kirsten Ewers. "Refugees from Burma: Their Background and Refugee Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, January 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/burmese>
- <sup>9</sup> Ba Zahn Lin, interview by author, Buffalo, NY, October 17, 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> IOM Bangkok. "Burmese Cultural Profile." PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada. 2005. Accessed April 17, 2015.
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- <sup>12</sup> "Myanmar Etiquette - General Rules." Today in Myanmar. December 21, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.myanmar2day.com/myanmar-culture-custom/2008/12/myanmar-etiquette-general-rules/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Nieman, Amy. "Karen Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile>.
- <sup>14</sup> Scarlis, Christine. "Chin Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 2, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/chin/chin-cultural-profile>.
- <sup>15</sup> Refugees from Burma: Their Background and Refugee Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, January 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/burmese>.
- <sup>16</sup> Id.
- <sup>17</sup> "Myanmar." Ethnologue. January 1, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/country/MM>.
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- <sup>19</sup> Id.
- <sup>20</sup> "Karen Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 11, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile>
- <sup>21</sup> Refugees from Burma: Their Background and Refugee Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, January 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/burmese>.
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- <sup>23</sup> Scarlis, Christine. "Chin Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 2, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/chin/chin-cultural-profile>.
- <sup>24</sup> Id.
- <sup>25</sup> Id.
- <sup>26</sup> Scarlis, Christine. "Chin Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 2, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/chin/chin-cultural-profile>.
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- <sup>30</sup> "Karen Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 11, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile>



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