Cultural Background Profile: AFGHANISTAN

Language
Pashto and Dari

Teaching in the Classroom
It is estimated that only one-third of school-age Afghan children ever attended school during the 1980s, during the Soviet occupation. The education system fell apart completely in the ensuing civil war. Children were either taught at home, in the local mosque, or not at all.

Under the Taliban, secular education did not exist. Boys received religious education, and girls were forbidden education altogether. In Islam, education is more highly valued than wealth but parents who wanted their children educated arranged for private tutoring in informal groups.

Afghans in the United States have a higher mean level of education than Southeast Asian and African refugee groups, but decades of recurrent conflict have led to the education being disrupted or discontinued. In Pakistan, approximately 80% of the school-age Afghan refugee population is currently out of school, resulting in extremely low literacy among Afghan refugees, especially among women and girls. Many women and elders have had little or no formal education at all.

Family/School Engagement
Children are expected to work hard in school and to come home after school to do homework. For this reason, some parents might not allow their children to engage in after-school activities. Boys usually have much more freedom than girls. Another contributing factor may be that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.
While Afghan communities in the United States have made tremendous concessions to Western life, there is often tension in families as the children bring their school-learned American sensibilities into homes with traditional Afghan values. Schools teach children independence and assertiveness, which contradict cultural values of family interdependence and strict obedience to elder family members, particularly to the father’s authority. Families are concerned that children will pick up immodest behavior from their non-Muslim classmates, as well as from school itself.

Culture, Gender and Family

The Afghan population in the United States shares a common nationality and Islamic religion, but it is diverse in terms of political orientation, religious affiliation, ethnicity, social class, and attitude toward modernization. The importance of this diversity cannot be overstated. In terms of ethnicity alone, there are 19 different groups in Afghanistan, and, while the majority of Afghans in the United States are Pashtun and Tajik, there is an Uzbek minority in New York, as well as some Afghan Jews and Hindus; and Hazaras are scattered around the country.

Afghans are generally reluctant to share personal and family issues with nonfamily members, including healthcare professionals, although women may discuss their problems with friends, including non-Afghans. They dislike others, especially outsiders, telling them what to do. In the United States, Afghans might perceive school and social service agency intervention as undermining parental authority, responsibility and control.

The Afghan family is sacrosanct and a matter of great privacy. It is considered a significant breach of manners for a man to express interest of any sort in another man’s female relatives. For example, it may be inappropriate for a male teacher to ask, “How is your wife?”

Even though Afghan culture in the U.S. is in transition, with families ranging from traditional to cosmopolitan depending on their backgrounds and personal choice,
family life remains the core of U.S. Afghan culture. Afghans tend to socialize almost exclusively with extended family members, and this intense family focus can cause culture conflict in the U.S. Extended family obligations often supersede other responsibilities.

Afghan women have, generally speaking, adapted to the U.S. better than have Afghan men, who have had difficulty finding a middle road between a traditional and an American lifestyle. The traditional husband’s power and role as head of the family is further undermined when children learn English more quickly than their parents do and become their parents’ translators and spokespersons.