



Burundian refugee students: Cultural background

Language

Kirundi and French; Swahili spoken in specific areas; and some English.

Teaching in the Classroom

Burundi has a very young population with 45.64% aged 14 or younger. There is no official curriculum for primary education. Lower primary school is taught in Kirundi, which presents a challenge when students have to transition in fifth grade to learning in French. Burundi's education system has high repetition and dropout rates.



Most refugees, however, will have come from camps outside Burundi and their children will have been born in camps. Primary education is available in the camps, but schools are poorly equipped or understaffed, classes are overcrowded, and attendance is inconsistent. There is not much opportunity for students to practice what they have learned while in the camps.

Family/School Engagement

The Burundian population is largely composed of small-scale peasant farmers with a little formal education, rural backgrounds, long residence in refugee camps, and past trauma. Many refugees who have witnessed traumatic events will show signs of PTSD.

Children are highly valued in Burundian societies. They represent insurance for the future—as one proverb says, “The greatest sorrow is to have no children to mourn for you.” Children are taught communal and family values, such as treating elders with supreme respect and responding promptly and willingly to their commands.

In Burundian culture, a typical greeting involves both people wishing each other large herds. Handshakes are important and vary by location. For instance, one version involves touching one's left hand to the other person's elbow. People stand close



together when talking and often continue holding hands for several minutes after shaking. Facial expressions and gestures are not well received because they are interpreted as a lack of control or a lack of calmness. Pointing with the index finger is often considered rude. A Burundian will usually point by extending his or her arm outward, with the palm turned upwards.

Social gatherings, large or small, formal or informal, often include food and drink, especially beer. It is considered rude to turn down food or drink when it is offered.

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

Ethnic groups in Burundi include Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, Europeans, and South Asians. Burundian households are typically made up of nuclear families with extended families nearby. Uncles and aunts often assume care and responsibility for their siblings' children. Traditional Burundian society is patriarchal. Men assume leadership roles within their households and communities. Traditionally, men farm while women and girls carry out household duties, such as firewood collection, cooking, laundry, and childcare. Women have more duties than rights and are expected to be subordinate to men.

Many women who have grown up in refugee camps have attended primary school, and some have attended secondary school. A few women have been able to receive training in traditionally female occupations (e.g. nursing and teaching). Women are not restricted socially from working outside the home.

Traditional medicine is practiced to some extent. People normally go to traditional practitioners when they cannot afford to buy modern medicine or travel to the hospitals outside the camps. Deaths of family members are sometimes attributed to witchcraft.