Mon refugee students: Cultural background profiles

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, Rakhine/Rohinyan, and Mon. The Mon come from Mon state, but there has been a mass exodus of Mon people to Thailand.

Language
Mon and Burmese

Teaching in the Classroom
Formal education in Burma is provided through government-led Basic Education schools. Basic Education schooling lasts 11 years: 5 years of primary school (Kindergarten to Standard 4) and 6 years of secondary education. Students graduate at 16 or 17 years old. The government maintains a ban on the Mon language after primary level in state schools. The cost of School uniforms, books and extra fees create a barrier to accessing free education. Parents with struggling students must pay extra tuition fees for after-school help. This is costly and discouraging, especially for poor parents who cannot afford basic fees.

There are also various school systems unique to Mon regions. There are national Basic Education Schools, Mon National Schools and ‘Mixed Schools’. Mixed Schools are essentially government Basic Education schools that, through an informal partnership with the Mon National Education Committee, teach additional courses on Mon language, culture and history.

Education remains inaccessible for poor children in rural communities. High dropout and resource constraints are major challenges for rural Mon groups. In rural villages, over a third of children who stated when they had left education dropped out before completing Primary School. Another third dropped out immediately following Primary School completion, failing to make the transition to Secondary Education. Three quarters of students who gave reasons why they had dropped out from education
reported issues related to livelihood difficulties. Low income children sacrificed school for work to assist the family, the cost of education is unaffordable, family labor migration and poverty are all factors influencing educational attainment. Many rural schools struggle with insufficient teaching materials or human resources.

**Family/School Engagement**

Many of the larger cultural norms practiced in Burma can be found among the Mon people. For example, 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.

Furthermore, 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 US or been very young when their families came to the US. Literacy rates of adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the US are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

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 even if parents want to be involved.

Respect for elders is important. Thus, 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.

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 Mon are considered to be one of the first peoples in the Southeast Asia and the earliest one to settle in Burma. Mon are devout Buddhists and they follow their own ceremonial calendar of Theravadin festivals.

In general Burmese society, traditions and customs not only expect a woman to bear and care for the children but she is responsible for the child’s general wellbeing, must keep order and discipline, provide love and sympathy, and ensure each member of the family is healthy, happy and if possible wise. Women’s reputations in relation to sexuality and chastity are important and encourage the practice of forced marriages between women to the men who have sexually harassed or assaulted them. Gender discrimination and cultural norms favor men over women.