

WORKING WITH THE BURMESE POPULATION

**A CULTURAL COMPETENCY RESOURCE TOOLKIT
FOR INDIANA WORKERS AND CAREER COACHES**

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Workforce Education and Training

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BACKGROUND

A refugee is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” (United Nations)

The refugees from Burma are the biggest refugee group in the United States at the current time. Democratic rule ended in Burma with a military coup. Since the coup, Burma has been controlled by a succession of repressive governments.

Due to the coup, the country is now facing an economic crisis in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The military has also blocked civilian communications such as access to the internet and social media.

Back in Indiana, many of the refugees call the Hoosier state home. Indianapolis is home to the largest Burmese community in the United States, with about 24,000 as of 2020. Fort Wayne is home to about 10,000 Burmese Hoosiers and smaller populations also reside in South Bend, Logansport, and Bloomington. (*IndyStar*)



ABOUT THE BURMESE/MYANMAR CULTURE

CULTURAL VALUES

Most (if not all) Burmese show a deep respect for elders, dress modestly and act with discretion towards the opposite gender.

COMMUNICATION

Generally speaking, people from Myanmar tend to maintain a **modest** and **calm** disposition. This is partly due to the concept of face. Face indicates a person's reputation, dignity and honor. By complimenting people, showing them respect or doing something to increase their self-esteem, you give them face. Similarly, people can lose face by being criticized or behaving in a way that is considered socially inappropriate.



GREETINGS

- The traditional greeting in Myanmar is a bow whilst placing both hands on your stomach.
- Often younger people will bow and an older person will simply nod in response.
- Some Burmese (generally urban residents and non-Buddhists) shake hands to greet. In doing so, they may support their right elbow in their left hand whilst they shake another person's hand.
- Use people's appropriate titles when addressing them (e.g. Mr, Mrs) unless they are children.
- The common formal greeting in Burmese is "Min-ga-la-ba shin" (said by a woman) or "Min-ga-la-ba khin-bah" (said by a man). Both of these sayings mean 'Hello'.



BASIC ETIQUETTE

- How one sits, walks or otherwise interacts with others is based on the status of each person present. For example, it is expected that people are especially conscious of their behavior in the presence of an elder.
- Younger people are expected to keep their body lower than those that are older than them. For example, they may duck their head or bow slightly as they pass, or sit on a lower seat.



- It is rude to blow one's nose into a tissue around other people.
- Quickly apologize if you accidentally pick up something that belongs to another person
- It is customary to walk behind people who are older than yourself. If you have to walk in front of someone, ask first or apologize. If someone is seated, walk around them.



- It is considered important to dress in modest and neat clothing.
- When passing or receiving an item, use both hands together to signify respect. The right hand may be used alone in casual situations, but it is taboo to use one's left hand.



OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Refer to people by their chosen identity. Many from ethnic minorities may not actually want to be referred to as 'Burmese' and will prefer to use their ethnic identity, e.g. Karen, Chin, Rohingya. The Karen people may be particularly opposed to being called Burmese.
- Be sensitive to the reality that many Burmese living in other countries may have experienced trauma of some kind. This includes abuse by security forces, witnessing the death of family members, forced separation from family and impoverishment from a lack of basic resources. Political dissidents may have experienced interrogation, imprisonment or even torture.
- Consider that upfront honesty is not always appreciated. The Burmese are generally quite discreet unless they know someone very well.
- If discussing a sensitive topic, add lots of reassurance throughout conversation to put your Burmese counterpart at ease.
- Expect to be asked where you are going, when you last ate and what you are doing quite often. This is a cultural norm and is not intended to be intrusive.
- Dress modestly with your shoulders, chest and upper thigh covered.
- Avoid talking about yourself too much or boasting. The Burmese are especially humble people.



**Source: "Burmese Myanmar Culture." Cultural Atlas, 2016, culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/burmese-myanmar-culture/. Accessed 22 Dec. 2021.*



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