

# Culture and Mental Health Among Refugees from Burma

**EMBARC**

# Burma (Myanmar)

- Southeast Asian nation
- 60-80% are farmers
- 135 distinct ethnic groups
- 100 languages and dialects
- World's longest-running civil war
- Repressive military regime
- 25% of newly arrived refugees in Iowa are from Burma



## ETHNIC LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS OF BURMA

ETHNIC NAME	BURMA	KACHIN	KARENNI/ KAYAH	KAREN/ KAYIN	MON	RAKHINE/ ARAKAN	SHAN
DIALECTS	Burmese	Jinghpaw Rawang Lisu Maru (Lachid) Lashi Zay Wa	Kayah (Ancient) Kayah (Modern) Kayan (Padaung) Kayah Mo Nu Yin Ta Lai Gay Kyo Kayaw (Pa Yai) Yin Baw Za Yein Gay Pah	Sgaw Pwo Pa'o	Mon	Arakan Rohinga	Shan Tai Shan
				<b>STATES OF BURMA</b>			
				Kachin Kayah Kayin Chin Mon Rakhine Shan	Thanin Thayl Yangon Ayeyawaddy Bago Magwe Mandalay Sagaing		
ETHNIC NAME	CHIN						
DIALECTS	Hakha Sub dialect- Hakha	Thlantlang Lautu Khualsim Senthang Zokhua Mie Zotung	Falam Laizo Zahau Zanniat BualKhua Ngawn Tapong Parte Tlaisun Sim Khualsim Lente Lusai (Mizo)	Tedim Tedim (zomi) Sizang Teizang	Tuanzang Zo	Southern Chin Matu Mindat Kanpalet Dai Cho Asho Zotung	Mizo Mizo

# Past Trauma - Fleeing Burma

## Illegal workers in India or Malaysia

- Cramped living spaces
- No rights or protections, constant fear of arrest and deportation
- No access to formal education, health care, and legal employment

## Resettlement camps

- Overcrowded; Lack of running water and electricity
- Limited education, health care, and jobs
- Limited food and supplies

- Victims of and witnesses to killings, rape, and domestic violence
- Separated from family members and loved ones
- Suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression

# After Moving to Iowa

## Acculturation Issues

- Adjustment to American culture
- Change from rural to urban lifestyle
- Adjustment to cold weather
- Changes in acceptable child discipline techniques
- Inadequate understanding of American health care and school systems
- Inadequate understanding of American laws

## Common Stressors

- Language barriers
- Unemployment
- Fear and mistrust of police
- Feeling unwelcome

# Cultural Perspectives on Mental Health

## Limited Knowledge/Traditional Beliefs

- Lack of awareness and knowledge
- No word or term in language
- Use other phrases, like:
  - Feeling Bad, Thinking too Much
  - Heavy Heart, specific symptoms
- Traditional healers and methods
- Possession by spirits is thought to be a cause of mental illness; ceremonies or purification rituals

## Cultural Expectations

- Be stoic
- Bear problems without complaint
- Consult religious leaders
- Receive care from family
- Seek “encouragement” from family, friends, and community leaders

## Stigma

- Associated with taboos
- Considered a private “family issue”

# Barriers and Challenges

## Barriers to accessing care

- Treatment is not responsive to cultural or religious beliefs
- Provider declines to make or accept a refugee mental health referral
- Provider lacks competence to work with refugees or trauma
- Appointments not available or wait is too long
- Insurance or eligibility barriers
- Outpatient services unable to engage severely mentally ill patient
- **Language barriers, failure to utilize interpreters, and interpreters not qualified**

## Lack of care coordination

- Failure to coordinate adequate or timely care
- Failure to resolve transportation barriers
- Provider or client unable to initiate first appointment

# Stories





## Solutions

### Active Care Coordination

- Communication between providers
- Direct referral and appointment scheduling
- Case management

### Establishing Trust and Identifying Mental Health Symptoms

- Proactive identification of mental health symptoms
- Access to imbedded mental health or referral coordinators
- Trust developed through family or ethnic community leaders, health or non-health providers

# Stories



# Best Practices

- Provide support to the whole family, not just the patient
- Provide translated materials
- Use trained interpreters specializing in health and mental health
- Ensure interpretation is for the correct language and dialect
- Hire bicultural workers and cultural liaison officers
- Work to understand the community's history, values, and expectations
- Build trust with community leaders

# Questions?

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# Thank you!

Burmese ဇယားဖီးသငုဂျဘက္ခို

Karen တာ်ဘျူး (Ta Blu)

Falam Chin Ka lungawi

Karenni ကပုဗ္ဗဲကပ်ခါ

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