Cultural Considerations for working with Burmese refugees:

- Mental health issues and mental illnesses are viewed as “karma” by the many Burmese and little action is taken to remedy mental health problems.
- Some Burmese refugees are beginning to trust in their primary care doctors in the US for assistance with mental health issues.
- Physical contact/touch, such as a handshake, is not the norm in Burma. A slight bow of the head is the common way to greet others. It is especially frowned upon to touch anyone older than oneself on the top of the head or to touch anyone of the opposite sex.
- Refugees from Burma have been living in opposition to the ruling government for 20 years, many being forced into labor camps, forced relocation, loss and/or destruction of property, rape, and killing of family members.
- Burmese families commonly all sleep on the floor together.
- There are approximately 107 languages spoken in Burma relating to the separateness of ethnic groups. The official language of Burma is Burmese of which only 65% of the population speaks. This can make finding an appropriate interpreter for a Burmese family very challenging.
- Dating practices are very strict within the Burmese family. Young adults must be supervised at all times and both sets of parents must give permission for a couple to wed.
- Alcohol is much easier to access in the US and has led to some substance abuse issues among (primarily male) Burmese refugees.
- In Burma there were no legal restrictions against a husband/father physically abusing his wife or child. Clarification of these laws in the US can be very helpful.
- In the refugee camps, children were allowed to roam and play freely. Parents may continue this practice in the US, not realizing the dangers of busy streets.
- Working and a strong work ethic is very important to the Burmese.
- A study conducted by the CDC (2004) on Burmese refugees living in a refugee camp in Thailand found that “culture-specific symptoms such as “numbness,” “thinking too much” or feeling “hot under the skin” were common.” These symptoms related to a Depression, Anxiety, and PTSD.
- In the above study by the CDC 59% of the refugees reported that they talk to family or friends to make themselves feel better.

Additional Resources:
A documentary that provides a rare look into the atrocities of the government and the stifling oppression that the citizens experience is titled “Burma VJ” (available at Waterfront Video in Burlington).