

## Karen Cultural Profile

**PLEASE NOTE:** This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the groups of Karen people who live in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. This profile should therefore be used only as a guide.

### Introduction:

The Karen (or Kayin) people are an ethnic group from Myanmar (formally Burma) (Australian Karen Foundation, n.d). They are ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse to the Burmese people (Lane, Pitruzzello, & Dunne, n. d). The Karen people originally came from the border of Tibet, and now many are based in Irawaddy Delta region in Burma or in Thailand. However, the Karen people are mostly located within the Karen State and Tenasserim Region in Burma, close to the Thai border (Lane, et al, n.d).

The Karen community, who are largely from refugee backgrounds, began arriving in Australia in approximately 2003, and are continuing to grow in Victoria (Lane, et al, n.d). They are now one of the biggest refugee groups to have arrived in Victoria in the past 15 years.

Prior to Burma's independence in 1948, the Karen people (like all citizens of Burma) were under the rule of the British. When Burma was granted independence from Britain in 1948, the Karen people were no longer recognised by the Burmese government and have since fought to have their rights recognised in a Burmese-dominated government (Neiman, Soh & Sutan, 2008).

For many years, the Karen people in Burma have endured much oppression and persecution by the Burmese government, leading many to flee their country (Waddington, 2002). Much of this has been in the form of political and economic exploitation due to Burma's military regimes. The Karen culture has been suppressed and the human rights of the Karen people have been violated with many being forcibly removed from their homes in an attempt by the government to control them.

To escape persecution, many Karen people fled to Thailand and lived in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. While several people have since been resettled as refugees in western countries including Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia, others remain in the camps awaiting resettlement through the UNHCR.

### Migration:

- More than 140,000 Karen refugees have fled to Thailand from Burma because of war and human rights abuse, and the persecution they have experienced for decades (Lane, et al, n.d).
- There are nine major refugee camps in Thailand in which the Karen community live in exile, the largest camp being Mae La. The Mae La camp has a population of approximately 37,000 people and consists of around 6,700 households (The Border Consortium, 2017). At 93%, the Karen make up the largest ethnic group in the Mae La camp (UNHCR, 2016).

When first arriving at a refugee camp, individuals are registered with UNHCR as refugees. They then await resettlement in a country such as Australia. The Karen community who arrived at the Mae La camp would have first registered with UNHCR and then began their wait for resettlement.

Within the Mae La camp, the UNHCR have played a vital role in ensuring people have access to applying for the protection they need (UNHCR, 2016). As Thailand does not have legislation regulating the status of refugees, UNHCR has worked together with the Provincial Admissions Board (PAB) to ensure that the unregistered refugees are recognised (UNHCR, 2016). UNHCR have also assisted in working toward durable solutions for refugees from Burma (UNHCR, 2016).

## Language: Karen-speaking people in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total number of people speaking Karen at home	10-19 years	20-29 years	30-39 years	50-59 years	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 years and over
City of Boroondara	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
City of Knox	24	5	10	0	5	0	0	0
City of Manningham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
City of Maroondah	333	87	66	44	20	9	0	0
City of Monash	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
City of Whitehorse	14	5	4	0	0	0	0	0
Shire of Yarra Ranges	92	16	23	17	8	9	0	0
Eastern Region	463	113	103	61	33	18	0	0

(ABS Census 2016)

- There are two major dialects spoken within the Karen community. These are Sgaw and Pwo (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d).

Local Government Area	Karen Speaking people who arrived in Australia between July 2016 - June 2018
City of Boroondara	0
City of Knox	8
City of Manningham	0
City of Maroondah	37
City of Monash	0
City of Whitehorse	2
Shire of Yarra ranges	5
Eastern Region	52

(Australian Government Department of Social Services 2018: Settlement Database).

Please Note: This data is concerning settlers in Australia who have been granted a permanent or provisional Visa.

- It is important to note that gathering accurate data detailing the number of Karen speaking new arrivals can be difficult due to country of birth being captured differently. Due to years spent in exile in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, some Karen-speaking people were born in Thailand, however some data only captures the Karen-speaking people born in Burma. Therefore, the data captured may not be fully representative of the Karen-speaking people that are settling in Australia.
- Only a few will speak Burmese, but this depends on their location in relation to towns in Burma (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- From Census data 2016, Karen was amongst the top three language spoken at home by Burma-born people. Additionally, the City of Maroondah was the highest Local Government Area (out of the Eastern Metropolitan Region) for Karen-speaking people to settle (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2018).

## Religion:

- Maintaining culture is very important to Karen people. A lot of this is done through religion and faith (Lane, et al, n.d).
- The majority of Karen people who resettle in Australia are Christian.
- Some Karen people also identify as Buddhists.
- Some Karen people also hold an Animist beliefs. This is the belief in nature spirits.
- Even though religious beliefs differ, Karen people maintain unity and culture through celebration of important days such as Karen national day (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

## Marriage and Courtship:

- Karen people are generally free to choose their own partners (World Relief: Fort Worth, 2018).
- Karen culture is generally a matriarchal society, with the head of a spirit group always being a women (Neiman, et. al, 2008). At marriage, the husband becomes part of the wife's clan. However, men and women are generally considered equal (Karen Organisation of Minnesota, 2017).
- Culturally, men tend to provide financially for the family and women care for the children, do household work and manage the family budget. Today, this has changed due to the influence of the Australian culture. Women can work and men can help care for children (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Historically, when a couple gets married, they did not share a last name (Neiman, et al, 2008). However, having a shared last name is now more common within Karen families, particularly those who have migrated to western cultures where first and last names are the norm (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- The Karen community are generally unfamiliar with same-sex marriage and some community members may find same-sex relationships confronting (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

## Pregnancy:

- Pregnant women are highly respected within Karen culture, however pregnancy outside of marriage is generally frowned upon (Neiman, et al, 2008).
- Traditional Karen culture has various taboos for pregnant women, including not drinking alcohol and not attending funerals.
- In Karen refugee camps, early prematurity of babies carries the highest risk of mortality (Turner et al., 2013). One third of all deaths in children aged under 5 was within the neonatal period (Turner et al., 2013).
- It is best to have health practitioners of the same gender as the client when conducting maternal health checks on Karen women (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

## Childbirth and Child rearing:

- Traditionally in Karen state in Burma, births took place at home with the help of family members or a village mid-wife.

- Birthdates may not have been recognised or recorded upon birth. Karen people from refugee backgrounds living in Australia may therefore have an estimated date of birth on their travel documents, estimating the day, month and sometimes the year when they filled the migration application forms. However, this is not the case for all people, with many having correct dates of birth (Neiman, et al, 2008).
- When births occurred in the refugee camps, birth certificates were not generally issued. Some Karen women tried to record the birth of their child, but this was not recognised due to not being recognised citizens in Thailand. Instead, immunisation cards are known to be used as birth certificates, and this may be the only record of a child's birth available (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018)
- After birth, women are restricted to how much work they can do, and generally rest for one month to maintain their health (Neiman, et al, 2008).
- For three days after birth, Karen mothers sit by a fire and generally do not move. The father of the baby is to care for her, feed her and care for the children (Neiman, et al, 2008). Today, hot water bottles or heaters can be used instead.
- After birth, women do not shower or wash their hair. The length of time varies for each woman, but can be days at a time (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Infants are usually breastfed, with the duration ranging from 1.5 to 3 years. However, babies are also fed a few grains of rice before breast milk is introduced (Queensland Government, 2016).
- It is not uncommon for other Karen families to look after children who are not their own, and play a role in raising them (Neiman, et al, 2008).
- Due to the influence of Australian culture, men now play a role in raising the children (World Relief: Fort Worth, 2018).

### **Attitudes and Issues with Ageing:**

- Elders are respected highly, and some may know traditional medicine (Neiman, et al, 2008).
- The advice given by elderly family members is very highly valued and can be preferred or accepted over that of other family members.
- It is considered disrespectful to argue or challenge someone with a senior social status as respect for the social hierarchy of age is very important.
- Elders are always consulted in decision-making. This includes consultation of church Pastors and those who are highly educated in a village (Partridge, Naw, Zu, Ishu & Cachia, 2009).
- Families assist in caring for their ageing parents and it is common for ageing parents to move in and live with their adult children. This is generally preferred over aged care facilities, as there can be strong guilt attached if a family decided to place their parents in aged care. Karen families feel it is their responsibility to care for their ageing parents (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

### **Attitudes to Disability and Mental Health:**

- Translations between Karen language and English for medical terminology are similar, especially for depression and anxiety. However, complications can still arise for a clearly defined diagnosis (Karen Organisation of Minnesota, 2017).

- Karen people who are struggling with psychological issues are expected to bear their problems with no complaining. Instead, they may turn to religion or religious leaders for advice (Refugee Health, 2012).
- There are limited traditional treatments for mental illness related conditions. However, there can be a view that mental illnesses arise from spirit possession therefore religious advisors may conduct ceremonies or purification rituals (Refugee Health, 2012).
- Currently, community leaders (church Pastors, monks or traditional healers) may act as counsellors for those who are experiencing mental health concerns (Refugee Health, 2012).
- Karen refugees have usually experienced much trauma in their past and coming to Australia can produce high levels of stress due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with Australian systems and a new culture. As a result, stress can be a big problem for individuals and families within the Karen community (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Due to unfamiliarity with counselling practices, counselling can produce some stress for Karen people due to the amount of questions asked. It is best to be mindful of the level of questioning given when working with members of the Karen community (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Karen families provide support to loved ones in difficult periods and rely heavily on spiritual beliefs and practices for support and strength. Counsellors and other professionals should inquire about local support networks and assist the person in connecting them to a Karen support network (Partridge, et al., 2009).

## Attitudes to Death and Palliative Care:

- After death, the body is washed and dressed in fine clothes.
- Funeral traditions vary according to religions.
- Karen of Animist faith believe in the afterlife and dress the corpse so they are accepted in to the land of the Lord of the Dead, *Khu See-du*. The body will either be cremated or buried.
- Karen of Buddhist faith have cremation ceremonies involving prayers so to ease the deceased person into the next incarnation.
- Karen of Christian faith have a funeral prayer service and bury the body. It is common for a wooden cross to mark the grave (Countries and their Cultures, n.d).
- When a death occurs within the community, families gather as a way of showing support. Prayer services can also be held (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- The idea of organ donations is very foreign. There is generally an idea that organs should remain intact when one dies (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Palliative care is a relatively new concept for Karen people. As there is not as much awareness of health conditions in Burma, Karen people may be unfamiliar with care that is specific to terminal cases (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- It is important to be sensitive around talking about death. The Karen community are not as familiar with direct information around death (for example, when an illness is terminal), and this can be quite confronting (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Generally, death is not mentioned to the patient directly, as this can cause stress and anxiety (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

## Customs / Values:

- Karen people are generally opposed to being called Burmese, as they prefer to use their Ethnic identity of Karen (SBS Cultural Atlas, 2018; Queensland Government: Metro South Health, 2015). It is important to be mindful that ethnically, they are a very different group and many associate Burma with being driven from their home (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Karen people value being modest and having a calm composition. This stems from the importance of 'face' (SBS Cultural Atlas, 2018).
- Displays of anger are not respected within the community as Karen people generally avoid public displays of negative emotion.
- Karen people are very considerate of other people's feelings. However, this can make it challenging to get a direct and open answer to a crucial question.
- If invited to eat with others, it is polite to at first decline the offer, then accept it graciously (SBS Cultural Atlas, 2018).

## Communication Styles:

- Traditionally, a polite greeting involves holding the right elbow in their left hand and shaking hands with their right hand (Countries and their Cultures, n.d; Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- Introductions include the titles *Saw* for men and *Naw* for women, as well as their names.
- Direct eye contact is a sign of respect. Traditionally, and contrary to western culture, some Karen people may also fold their arms to show respect. This should not be mistaken for being rude.
- Culturally, speaking direct is generally considered rude (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Men and women don't usually touch in public (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Saying 'no' is often a way of being modest (Neiman, et al., 2008). Karen people may answer 'no', even when they mean the affirmative, to sound modest. Asking open ended questions rather than yes/no responses is therefore favoured, as it allows for Karen people to develop an answer in their own time (SBS Cultural Atlas, 2018).

## Naming Conventions:

- Karen people are addressed by their given names and usually these mean something (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Traditionally, Karen people don't have first and last names, but a series of 2 to 4 words as their name (Neiman, et al., 2008). When applying for a visa, the UNHCR forms require a first and last name, and sometimes a person's name is written by a UNHCR official on a form all as a first name, all as a last name, or the name can be split up at random, with some words of the name used as a first name and other words as the last name. Whatever the UNHCR officials put on the official forms as the person's first and last name is what will be on their travel document, even if one part is left blank. This then becomes the person's official name in Australia, as it is often the only form of identification the person has.

Because of this, filling out forms in Australia can be challenging as Australian culture and most forms and documents require a separate first and last name and both individuals and staff from a variety of agencies and organisations (such as Centrelink, medical practices, schools, utility companies etc.) become confused when working with the Karen community.

Recognising these challenges and wanting to acculturate to life in Australia, some Karen people choose to officially change their name. However, this process is expensive, and some families often have to spend lots of money to do this (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).

## Health Beliefs and Practices:

- Doctors have a high social status so consequently; some patients may not feel comfortable questioning or expressing their true feelings regarding a service or treatment. Health care providers should ask open ended questions (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Traditional herbal medicines can still be practiced within the Karen community, however they generally use doctor's prescriptions in conjunction with these (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018). It is common for Karen people to have strong belief in western medicine as well as holding to their traditional beliefs about health and illness (Queensland Government, 2006).
- Due to their contact with travelling medical staff or non-government organisations who work in refugee camps, Karen people are generally familiar with western medical practices (Neiman, et al., 2008).
- Patients may feel more comfortable with interpreters of the same gender due to the sensitivity around some health care issues (Neiman, et al., 2008). Additionally, having doctors or health professionals of the same gender is important to the Karen community (Karen Leaders Consultation, 2018).
- A common belief is that good health results from the correct balance of 'hot' and 'cold' elements. For refugees, the variances in hot and cold in our Australian climate may cause some anxiety if they don't have access to traditional remedies (Refugee Health, 2012).
- Food is also closely aligned with good health. Some foods can be avoided by Karen people when sick, for example, some meats. Health providers should discuss dietary concerns when an illness is diagnosed (Refugee Health, 2012).

## Greetings:

English Greeting	Karen (Sgaw)	Closest English Pronunciation
Hello (good day/afternoon/night)	<i>Nee/ha/na ler ah ghay</i>	NEE/HA/NA LER A GHAY
Goodbye (see you later)	<i>Ti lor tha ler kee</i>	TI LAW THA LER KEY
Yes	<i>May</i>	MAY
No	<i>Ta may ba</i>	T'MAY BA
Thank you very much	<i>Ta bluh doh mah</i>	TA BLU DOH MAH
Good morning	<i>Gaw ler ah ghay</i>	GOR LER A GHAY
Good evening	<i>Ha ler ah ghay</i>	HA LER A GHAY

## Key Karen Festivals / Significant Dates:

- Karen Revolution Day: January 31<sup>st</sup>

This commemorates the start of the Karen uprising in 1949.

- Karen National Day: February 11<sup>th</sup>  
This commemorates the demonstration in 1949 when Karen people demanded their own homeland.
- Buddhist New Year/Water festival: Mid-April  
During the festival, respect is shown to elders by sprinkling water on them and making offering to spirits. In Burma and Thailand, people spray each other with water in the streets for several days.
- Karen Martyr's Day: August 12<sup>th</sup>  
This commemorates the anniversary of the death of Saw Ba U Gyi, the first president of the Karen National Union in 1950.
- Karen Wrist-Tying Ceremony: August (sometimes celebrated at weddings)  
Comes from the Animist belief to call back the spirits and bring good fortune.
- Sweet December: November 30<sup>th</sup>  
Marks the beginning of the Christmas celebrations for Christians.
- Karen New year: First day of Pyathoe on the Lunar Calendar (generally end of December-Mid January)  
Marks the end of the harvest of one rice crop and the beginning of the next.

## Local services useful for Karen residents in the Eastern Region

### Settlement Services

Provide information, referral and casework for refugees and family migrants who arrived in the last five years.

Name	Address	Contact
AMES Australia	30-32 Prospect St, Box Hill, 3128	Ph: 13 26 37
Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)	Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, Vic 3128 <u>and</u> 18 Bond Street, Ringwood Vic 3134	Ph: 9285 4888 (Box Hill) 9870 1351 (Ringwood)

### Aged Care & Disability Support Services

#### **Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), Access and Support Program**

Address: Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, 3128

Ph: 9275 6901

Email: [wzhang@miceastmelb.com.au](mailto:wzhang@miceastmelb.com.au)

Website: <http://miceastmelb.com.au/our-services/elderly-people-younger-people-disabilities-carers/>

The Access & Support Program provides short term support to help people access aged care and other services so they can stay living at home independently. The program provides information, referrals, support and monitoring. The aged and disability team generally aim to increase access to aged care and disability services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) through working with CALD communities to promote those services, provide information and referral and supporting organisations to provide culturally appropriate care. The team also receives funding for specific projects in this area.

### **Support Services**

#### **Eastern Karen Community Association of Victoria (EKCAV)**

Address: P.O Box 877, Croydon, 3136, Victoria

Ph: (03) 9876 3136

Email: [info@easternkaren.org.au](mailto:info@easternkaren.org.au)

Website: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1806917949556131/>

The Eastern Karen Community Association of Victoria is a community based organisation that aims to provide support to Karen refugees once they arrive in Australia. They provide assistance and promote awareness of the Karen community and the issues they face.

Currently, they have projects around a women's weaving and craft group, soccer and volleyball teams and Karen language classes.

#### **Australian Karen Organisation**

Address: P.O Box 1278 Werribee Plaza, Melbourne, Victoria 3030

Ph: (03) 9349 5254

Website: [www.ako.org.au](http://www.ako.org.au)

The Australian Karen Organisation (AKO) aims to assist Karen families and individuals to resettle in Australia. They work to continue the development of the Karen culture and language in Australia and to act as a representative from the Karen community in levels of Australian government. The AKO run language and education classes so to continue embrace their Karen cultural identity here in Australia. They also provide advocacy and settlement support, sporting tournaments and youth seminars.

#### **Croydon Hills Baptist Church**

Address: 6 Bemboka Road, Croydon Hills, 3136

Ph: (03) 9876 4503

Email: Karen Pastor: Moo Hei [moohei@chbc.org.au](mailto:moohei@chbc.org.au)

Karen Support Staff: Esera Muang [esera.maung@chbc.org.au](mailto:esera.maung@chbc.org.au)

Croydon Hills Baptist Church holds a weekly worship service for the Karen community. Over 400 Karen gather for worship and community here. Croydon Hills Baptist Church also employ Karen support staff. They aim to promote the wellbeing of the Karen Community and work closely with government departments. The Karen support staff can provide settlement assistance, education support and mentorship to the Karen community.

Croydon Hills Baptist Church also works with Luther College to deliver a homework program to Karen Students. Year 11 and 12 students from Luther College volunteer their time to assist Karen students in their studies, as well as building language skills and friendships.

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