

## **Educating Refugees in U.S. Schools: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Profile**

### **Language**

French is the official language of DRC along with Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, and Tshiluba. The majority of refugees are from eastern DRC and will speak Kinyarwanda as well as Kiswahili and French and maybe some minimal English.



### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Primary school is (in theory) compulsory, and public education is a hybrid system consisting of schools managed by the government and faith-based organizations. Children begin primary education age 6-7, and typically study in the mornings from Monday to Saturday. Generally, one teacher will teach all subject matters, and classrooms include students of mixed ages. To advance in their education, students must take a national exam at the end of grade 6. Secondary school consists of grades 7-12. The academic year is 30 weeks in length and broken into two semesters.

As of 2003, the DRC had one of the world's largest percentages of children out of school. Girls attend schools at lower rates in the DRC, so the majority of refugees with no primary or high school education and low literacy levels are female. Some obstacles impeding access to education include insufficient funding, school fees, community violence, child soldier recruitment, and the destruction of school buildings during the recent conflict.

Congolese children who attended school in a refugee camp in Uganda will have had greater exposure to English. Sexual exploitation of young and adolescent girls in refugee camps in Burundi and Tanzania is common. Girls are forced into sex work in exchange for basic goods, and there is frequent reporting of teachers demanding sex from girls in exchange for grades or money. In Nyaragusu camp in Tanzania, human compensation, in which families give women and girls as a form of payment for debts, is common.

### **Family/School Engagement**

59% of Congolese refugees have no oral English skills and an even greater percentage has no ability to read (65%) or write (66%) in English. More than half of the existing Congolese refugee population in the US is female, and 20% are single mothers. Nearly 40% of women in Eastern DRC have experienced sexual violence. The physical health, mental health and social impacts of sexual violence in the DRC cannot be understated.

Congolese take great pride in their appearance. Regardless of financial status, it is common to wear clean, handmade clothes. People dress up when going to work. Congolese are also very friendly. It is customary to shake hands when meeting people and when leaving as well. An inquiry must be made about one's health and family to indicate the required level of respect. There are several ways to greet people depending on time of day, the nature of the relationship, and so forth. Older people are shown respect through physical gestures, and agreement with them is considered more important than frankness.

Congolese often discipline their children physically, which presents a legal and cultural problem in the US. Traditionally, childcare is a community responsibility which conflicts with Americans' parenting practices. Congolese children often care for younger ones when parents are away. This also presents a cultural and legal problem in the US.

### **Culture, Gender and Family**

Among the Congolese, the nuclear family is only one part of a much larger extended family that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, and even those not related by blood. Many of the ethnic groups in the DRC are matrilineal. The oldest uncle on the mother's side is considered the most important male and sometimes has more influence over a child's life than does the father. Cousins on the mother's side are considered siblings. Congolese may often call a distant family member (or even someone not related by blood) their son, daughter, brother, or sister. This has created confusion both for overseas processing and for establishing legal relationships in the United States.

Tribal affiliation is often more important for Congolese refugees than national affiliation, and tribal names are a significant marker of religious identity and social status.

Gender roles vary among tribes. Men are generally regarded as the principal income earners and protectors of the household, and women are commonly expected to obey decisions made by men in their families. Both boys and girls begin helping out at home at a young age. Generally, women are in charge of domestic chores. In some rural areas, girls must stay at home until they marry at a young age. However, urban women tend to be more independent and have more say in family matters.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **BRYCS RESOURCES**

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=5616>

#### **REFUGEE BACKGROUNDERS**

<http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/congolese-refugees>

#### **WORLD FACTBOOK**

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/cg.html>

#### **IRC REFUGEE TEACHER PACKET**

[http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/migrated/where/united\\_states\\_salt\\_lake\\_city\\_ut/refugee-backgrounders.pdf](http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/migrated/where/united_states_salt_lake_city_ut/refugee-backgrounders.pdf)

#### **HEALTH**

<http://www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/profiles/congolese/index.html>

#### **DRC CULTURE**

<http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.html>