

Diversity in Southern Africa

Race/Ethnicity

Despite a relatively small population (2.1 million), there is rich ethnic diversity within Namibia. 11 major ethnic groups and many smaller groups contribute to Namibia's diversity and bring unique languages, culture, dress, traditions, and craft to Namibia as a whole.

While the majority of Namibians and South Africans are black, there are also white and "coloured" minorities. Coloured is a term used to refer to ethnic groups that originated from historical inter-racial mixing, particularly associated with the descendants of slaves in South Africa. Of the white minority, the group is made of German, Afrikaans, and English speaking people.

Namibia's current ethnic make-up and social integration has been dramatically impacted by previous colonial regimes. During German colonialism in the early 1900s, large populations of the Herero and Nama ethnic groups were killed in battle or enslaved at work camps. During German and South African colonialism, white colonial leaders divided people and allocated resources based on race. During South African rule, apartheid dictated that non-white Namibians be segregated from white Namibians, and further segregated by ethnic group. As a result, individual ethnic groups developed insularly and the apartheid policies created sharp ethnic divisions. Resources were provided in a reverse priority basis. The white minority were provided with the best education and social services, while non-white populations were given significantly less. Namibia's and South Africa's coloured population was used as a buffer between whites and Blacks during apartheid.

Despite a transition to democratic rule in 1990, ethnicity and race in Namibia is still a charged issue. Today, the country has retained the geographic separation of ethnic groups as was established during apartheid. Further, as a result of economic discrimination and a lack of job opportunities provided before independence, there still remains a wide gap between rich and poor based along racial and ethnic lines.

Today there is a growing Asian entrepreneurial community. Many immigrants are coming from China to Namibia to set up businesses colloquially known as "China Shops" and for other business reasons. Many Namibians feel threatened by their pressure and feel that they are taking jobs away from local Namibians.

For some white participants, coming to Namibia and South Africa may be the first time you will be a numerical racial minority. Participants may feel very uncomfortable as they may draw attention from local passers-by in some areas. Many participants have noted that walking around town or taking taxis points them out as tourists as many local whites drive their own vehicles. Many white participants will be singled out by local people asking for money or food as they may connect being white with having money. Additionally, many participants may be given more attention or privilege than non-whites in Namibia based on historical racial divides. This can create a challenging tension that individual participants must acknowledge and negotiate.

Black and African American participants undoubtedly will have a unique time interacting with black Namibians and South Africans. Despite sharing the same skin color, participants

will find that black Namibians and South Africans experience and perceive race and identity very differently from African Americans based on the historical and cultural differences between the two groups.

Additionally, people of color may find that Namibians and South Africans assume they are locals or that they are not from the United States. Some people in Namibia and South Africa have the perception that all Americans are white. Thus, when they meet non-white Americans, people may be very confused at the discrepancy. People of color may experience some discrimination when compared to the privilege that white participants may experience. It is important for all participants to be aware of the potential for this tension.

Religion

Many Namibians incorporate a strong sense of faith and religion into their lives. Approximately 90% of Namibians practice Christianity, but indigenous spiritual beliefs are still practiced by many people. Some people practice Christianity and also practice indigenous beliefs, while others practice one or the other more exclusively.

Christian missionaries in Namibia as early as the 1800s ingrained a strong foundation of Christianity in the country. Today, the Lutheran Church has a very strong presence in Namibia. Beyond providing a spiritual foundation, many churches have been active in supporting social causes and development issues.

Participants who stay with host families in Namibia generally find that families are accepting of participant's religious choices despite their own strong religious beliefs. Attending church or worship services is a common activity that participants may choose to share with their homestay families.

Participants are likely to find connection with a local religious congregation if they are interested. There are many evangelical and "born-again" churches, as well as more traditional Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican Churches. There is also a small presence of other non-Christian religions, such as Judaism and Islam, in the capital city Windhoek.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

Namibia and South Africa continue to make strides to advance equity in the areas of gender and sexual orientation. While there is not strong opposition to the gay and lesbian community, there is on the whole a lack of societal acceptance, especially in rural or remote areas.

Nonetheless, many gay or lesbian people lead closeted lives or engage discreetly in same-sex relationships.

South Africa's constitution is very forward leaning and outlines the ability for same-sex couples to marry. Its constitution is heralded as a very progressive and inclusive mandate, despite the lag that may be occurring among national sentiments. While Namibia's constitution does not ban same-sex marriage, no same-sex couples have applied for marriage in Namibia to date.

Since Independence, the gay and lesbian community has gained slow recognition and acceptance. Strong homophobic views were voiced by the government soon after Independence, but such remarks have not been made recently. Active non-governmental organizations promote advocacy and organizing around gay and lesbian rights.

There are many campaigns within Southern Africa to advance women's role in government and society. Unfortunately, despite successful campaigns, gender-based violence is still an issue in Namibia and remains closely watched by the media and civil society

GLBTQ participants in CGE programs may feel less support to disclose their sexuality or sexual orientation. It is often the assumption by many Namibians or South Africans that you are heterosexual. It will be up to the participant to decide whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation. This could undoubtedly change the way people think about you or change the nature of your relationship. It is likely that participants can seek out the gay community in Windhoek, but it is not very open or very large.

Some women who have come to Namibia have found that they receive more attention from local men than they are used to. Some men may be forward in asking about a women's marital status or dating. It is advised that all participants travel in groups during night time and this applies particularly to women considering the forward advances that many men may make

Ability

While many newer buildings make accommodations for people with all ability levels, many buildings in Namibia are older and lack ramps or elevators which would accommodate people with a range of abilities.

Windhoek, Namibia's capital city, is very hilly which may create a challenge for people with mobility challenges. While there are some paved sidewalks, other sidewalks are gravel.

Addressing Diversity in Southern Africa

The Center for Global Education seeks to introduce participants to a diverse cross-section of people and groups while in Namibia and South Africa. CGE also helps participants explore the ethnic, racial, economic and cultural diversity that makes Namibia and South Africa so unique.

Homestay

Participants receive an in-depth perspective on the diversity within Namibia and South Africa through different homestay opportunities. These homestays allow participants to learn more about the lives of people from specific ethnic groups or income classes.

Internships

Internships provide students with a great opportunity to further engage with Namibia's diversity through interactions they have with the internship organization and the local community.

Guest Speakers and Travel

Participants hear from local guest speakers who represent various sectors within society and seek to discuss issues ranging from the link between ethnicity and politics, efforts to address gender equity in Namibia, and discussions on poverty alleviation.

Your time in Namibia may also include regional travel where one is able to experience the environmental, as well as associated socioeconomic and cultural diversity through the country.

Personal and Group Reflection

Reflecting on your time abroad is a core part of CGE's experience. We believe that reflecting on your experience can help give you better insight on what you are seeing and experiencing while in another country. During individual and group reflections, participants are encouraged to confront the disparities they witness and to critically examine the diversity they see. Such opportunities can allow participants to learn from others, as well as think differently about their own assumptions and experiences.