

# Diversity in Mexico

## Race/Ethnicity



Mexico is an extraordinarily diverse country in ethnic and cultural terms. Over 60 different indigenous groups exist, many of which maintain their own language, and they make up 10-30% of the population today, depending on the statistics one consults. These groups are concentrated in the central and southern regions of Mexico, though some also live in the northern region. Over 60% of the Mexican population is mestizo—a mixture of Spanish and

indigenous blood, and approximately 9% are of European descent. During the colonial period, African slaves were brought to Mexico and their descendents live in Mexico today, many of whom mixed with the indigenous people and the Spaniards. These groups were brought to the coastal areas of the states of Veracruz, Guerrero and Oaxaca, where strong Afro-Mexican communities exist today.

The indigenous and the Afro-Mexican people are subject to blatant racism in Mexican society, and many mestizo people also experience racism to varying degrees, depending on their skin color and class background. However, many Mexicans don't believe that racism exists in Mexico; instead they blame any discrimination that does exist on classism. In Mexico, racism is closely linked to classism. This means that indigenous and Afro-Mexican people are the darkest-skinned and the poorest people in Mexico. The discrimination these groups experience is based on skin color, socio-economic class, and cultural background.



In early 1992, the Mexican Constitution was amended to include recognition of the multicultural character of the Mexican nation. The Zapatista movement in the state of Chiapas, which made its first public appearance in January 1994, has brought many of these issues to national attention. As a result, national networks of indigenous organizations gained strength and numerous organizations to recover Mexico's black identity, known as the "third root", are currently growing.

*"For me, learning about the third root, the Afro-Mexicans, was the most significant experience (of travel to Afro-Mexican communities in Guerrero). In walking down the streets in Cuajinicuilapa, I saw my own face. And although our struggles and contexts of life are drastically different, I felt I could relate to Mexico a little better because of these communities."*

~ Student, Duke University



In addition to the indigenous and Afro-Mexican population within Mexico, people have settled in Mexico from different parts of the world including the Philippines, the Middle East, France, Italy, China, Japan the United States and others. People of Arab descent have had an important influence on Mexican society and culture. In addition, many Jews fled the inquisition and pogroms and later the Holocaust in Europe to settle in Mexico. In the 1950s, many U.S. citizens sought

refuge in Mexico during the McCarthy period of political persecution. More recently, Mexico granted exile and refugee status to many Central and South Americans who left the dictatorships and civil wars in their countries. These groups experience varying levels of acceptance and/or discrimination.

## Discrimination

Students of color who study in Mexico often find that the expressions of racism are different than the ones they might experience in the United States. Some Mexicans have stereotypes that originate in television programs they watch or in their own experiences as migrants in the United States, and don't hesitate to express these stereotypes openly. In Mexico it is much more socially accepted to comment on people's physical characteristics than in the United States, where students may be accustomed to more insidious forms of racism that try to conform to "political correctness". Others express a type of fascination that some students find offensive—for example, African-American and Asian-American students have experienced repeated stares on the street, and Latino students are sometimes looked upon in condescending ways if they don't speak Spanish fluently. Some Mexicans are quick to point out to Latino students that they are "different" from them because of the fact that they live and study in the United States and thus experience (from their perspective) more privilege than the majority of the Mexican people.

*"Before coming to Mexico, I was very excited to connect and find my father's culture, and when I arrived I immediately felt rejected. I realized that when I am in the US, they treat me badly because I am Mexican, and here (in Mexico) they treat me badly because I am a gringa."*

~ Mexico semester student

Some former students have said that their semester in Mexico led them to reassess how they identify themselves with regard to race and ethnicity while others have indicated that it helped them deepen the identities with which they arrived. While their overall experiences were very positive and life-affirming, they have also been very emotional at times. This is why it is important to have support structures in place before coming to Mexico.

*"I've particularly liked the excursions. We've met with a wide variety of people representing diverse perspectives that challenge my own and make me grow. My favorite guest speaker was Nadia Alvarado, an Afro-Mexican woman who taught us about the minority population of African descent in Mexico. That hit home so much because it personally touched me and related to my own experience...My time here has expanded my cultural consciousness. Being here has also strengthened my personal identity."*

~ Student, Augsburg College



Many white students feel discomfort when Mexicans they don't even know will call them "güera" or "güero," which are terms used in Mexico to identify light-skinned people, including light-skinned Mexicans. Most Mexicans would not consider these terms insulting but rather just an identifying characteristic of the person.

*"I had always heard about "white privilege" in my classes but it wasn't something I ever really thought about. My semester in Mexico really opened my eyes to my white U.S. privilege and at the same time, challenged it."*

~ Student, Augsburg College.

## Religion

As a result of the Spanish conquest, Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country (about 89%). Nonetheless, Mexican Catholics vary widely in the degree to which they actually practice religion. Moreover, the Catholic Church in Mexico includes a



diversity of perspectives which range from people who openly practice and promote a progressive form of Catholicism known as liberation theology to those who are part of the conservative Opus Dei movement. Many indigenous groups in Mexico identify as Catholic, but also incorporate indigenous traditions—a practice known as “syncretism”. Evangelical and protestant denominations also exist in Mexico, as well as Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews and Muslims.

*"Spending a week in Amatlán (an indigenous village near Cuernavaca) is something I'll never stop processing. Even though I'm an atheist, it was amazing to live in such a spiritually powerful place. I felt great spiritual energy there. Also, I got to stay with two elderly gay men who've been partners for 40 or 50 years, which is something I'd never experienced in the U.S. They are now my adopted grandparents."*

~ Student, Augsburg College

It is common for Mexicans to assume that people from other countries are Christian, so students from other religions may find this surprising or even experience discrimination. For example, it is not unusual for someone to respond “The Jews killed Christ” when a student openly identifies as being Jewish. Unlike the United States, Mexicans tend to distinguish clearly between Catholics and non-Catholics. However, even though some Mexicans may not have much knowledge about other religions besides Catholicism, many are keen to learn when presented with the opportunity. In Cuernavaca there are many Catholic and Protestant churches, some of which hold services in English. An orthodox synagogue exists in Cuernavaca, and other opportunities exist in Mexico City for those interested in attending Jewish services.

*"As a Jewish student, I was at first unsure about applying to a study-abroad program organized by a Lutheran college. At times, it was difficult to be separate from a larger Jewish community both on the program and in Cuernavaca. However, the Crossing Borders program ended up being an incredibly spiritual experience for me, affording me the opportunity to engage with Judaism on a personal, political, and academic level I definitely hadn't anticipated and greatly increasing my commitment to religiously-grounded social transformation."*

~ Student, Earlham College

## Gender and Sexual Orientation

While “machismo” still permeates Mexican culture in many ways, many Mexican men and women are working to change this. Mexico has an important feminist movement, which includes not only middle and upper class Mexican women, but indigenous and poor women as well. In some places, men have organized to combat their own sexism and violence





against women. Women participate in social and political organizations on many levels and gradually more women are being appointed to high-level government and business positions. In recent years, the three major political parties in Mexico adopted quota laws to advance the political participation of women within the parties and as candidates in elections. Many human rights groups are organizing to demand justice and put an end to the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT) movement in Mexico is also growing rapidly. Although discrimination and even hate crimes against the LGBT community exist nation-wide, Cuernavaca is known as a particularly queer-friendly city. There, the LGBT community has organized a Gay Pride parade since 2005. Moreover, public establishments where the LGBT community is welcome, including numerous gay and lesbian bars and nightclubs, have multiplied in recent years, as have articles about LGBT themes in national publications available to the general public.

*"I feel like Cuernavaca has a really good network of LGBT-friendly places. On the nightlife side of things, it's very welcoming. It's not hidden and it's not exclusive."*

~ Student, University of North Carolina.

This is a particularly exciting time for queer people to study in Mexico, as laws have recently passed that enable same-sex civil unions and give LGBT couples, as well as unmarried heterosexual couples, the right to make medical decisions for their partners and list them as beneficiaries of pensions and inheritances. Although these laws do not afford same-sex couples with important legal rights such as social security or adoption, many LGBT people in Mexico are celebrating them as important steps forward in the struggle for human rights.



*"This program is definitely a safe space for LGBT students. My participation in this program was very important for me, not only in my academic development, but in my personal development. Because the program and the staff were so queer-friendly and queer-positive, I left the program feeling more comfortable with my identity as queer than I felt when I first came to the program. I am thankful that I was able to have such a positive, affirming experience studying abroad with CGE."*

~ Student, Wesleyan University

Both men and women have sometimes found it difficult to adapt to what seem like more traditional gender constructs than those to which they are accustomed in the United States. For example, women students often become angry and/or frustrated by the catcalls they receive on the street, though learning how to deal with these in another language can become an empowering experience! Similarly, male students have sometimes expressed frustration that they be expected to conform to “macho” standards. Transgendered students and others who defy traditional gender binaries confront particular challenges as transgendered people are largely rendered invisible in Mexico. Not all queer students may feel comfortable disclosing their gender or sexual identity in Mexico, though the staff at the Center for Global Education can provide support in this regard. Lesbian and gay-friendly homestays are also available in Cuernavaca and the surrounding areas.

### **Ability**

Cuernavaca is built on a number of mountains and ravines thus making it difficult for people with mobility issues to get around independently.

Further Readings on Racism and Discrimination in Mexico:

- *Romina* by Nadia Alvarado Salas, Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico
- *The Chocolate Covered Boy* by Nadia Alvarado Salas, Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico



### **Addressing diversity in Mexico:**

The staff at all the Center's sites has a commitment to diversity and each site implements this commitment in different ways. For example, in Mexico, the staff has carried out workshops for host families and language school instructors on a number of diversity issues so that these people, who have prolonged and sometimes close contact with students, are more sensitive to diversity issues and cultural differences they may encounter as they interact with students. Additionally, we often invite host families to participate in some of the same events in which students participate regarding these issues, which enriches the learning experience for both parties. Finally, themes of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and other forms of discrimination are themes that are woven throughout all the courses taught in Mexico, as well as the group reflections which take place within the living-learning environment.

**Homestays** - are available with families that represent the diversity of the



community (race and ethnicity, religion, socio-economic class, and sexual orientation)

**Programming** - Guest speakers and excursions provide participants with opportunities to learn from and about diverse groups within the host country, such as:

- a Nahua indigenous community leader who shares his community's culture, cosmovision, and history of successful community organizing
- the first openly lesbian member of Congress in Mexico and Latin America.
- a member of the Afro-Mexican community