



# Identity in Kenya: Tolerance and trust deficits point to opportunities for progress

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 449 | Winnie V. Mitullah

## Summary

Identity is an important attribute of individuals and groups that influences how people see themselves and relate to others. Individuals and groups leverage many different identities as the situation demands: ethnic, linguistic, economic, national, religious, and sexual, among others.

Identification with a particular group is not necessarily a problem – can indeed be both useful and enjoyable – unless identity is used to undermine the rights of those outside the group, including the right to access goods and services. In Kenya, as in many African countries, ethnicity has at times been a determinant of individuals' access to resources. But other identities are also used to create divisions of "us" vs. "them," including affluent vs. poor, Christian vs. Muslim, gay vs. straight, citizen vs. immigrant.

This analysis of Afrobarometer Round 8 findings shows that most Kenyans value both their national and ethnic identities and feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue and wearing traditional dress in public. Most do not experience unfair treatment based on ethnicity, religion, or economic status, but a sizeable minority do.

Most also believe there is strength in diversity, and express tolerant attitudes toward other ethnicities, religions, political views, and nationalities – but not toward different sexual identities.

And even though a majority say there is more that unites Kenyans than divides them, very few think they can trust other people.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Kenya, led by the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Kenyans between 28 August and 1 October 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2016.

## Key findings

- More than nine out of 10 Kenyans (93%) identify at least as much with their nation as with their ethnic group. But while few Kenyans identify primarily with their ethnic

group, about seven in 10 (69%) consider their ethnic group an important part of their identity.

- Eight in 10 citizens (81%) say they feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue in public, and a smaller majority (57%) say they have no problem wearing traditional or cultural dress in public.
- One in five Kenyans (19%) say their ethnic group is “often” or “always” treated unfairly by the government, while 29% say this happens “sometimes.”
- Similarly, almost one-fifth (18%) of respondents say other Kenyans treated them unfairly based on their ethnicity “several times” or “many times” during the previous year.
  - Fewer (11%) report being treated unfairly based on their religion, while more (25%) say their economic status was the basis of unfair treatment at least “several times.”
- A large majority (82%) of Kenyans say that communities made up of different ethnic groups, races, and religions are stronger than more homogeneous communities. And almost two-thirds (64%) say there is more that unites Kenyans than divides them.
- Most Kenyans express tolerant attitudes toward people from different ethnic groups (91%) and religious backgrounds (89%), people who support different political parties (79%), and immigrants and foreign workers (70%). But few (10%) indicate tolerance toward people of a different sexual orientation.
- Only one in 20 Kenyans (4%) believe that “most people can be trusted”; most (96%) say that one must be very careful when dealing with others.

## Citizens’ perceptions on identity

### *Ethnicity and citizenship*

The African continent struggles to achieve unity. The elusiveness of a United States of Africa is reflected in the hurdles that African states and regions face in unifying their diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and religious groups.

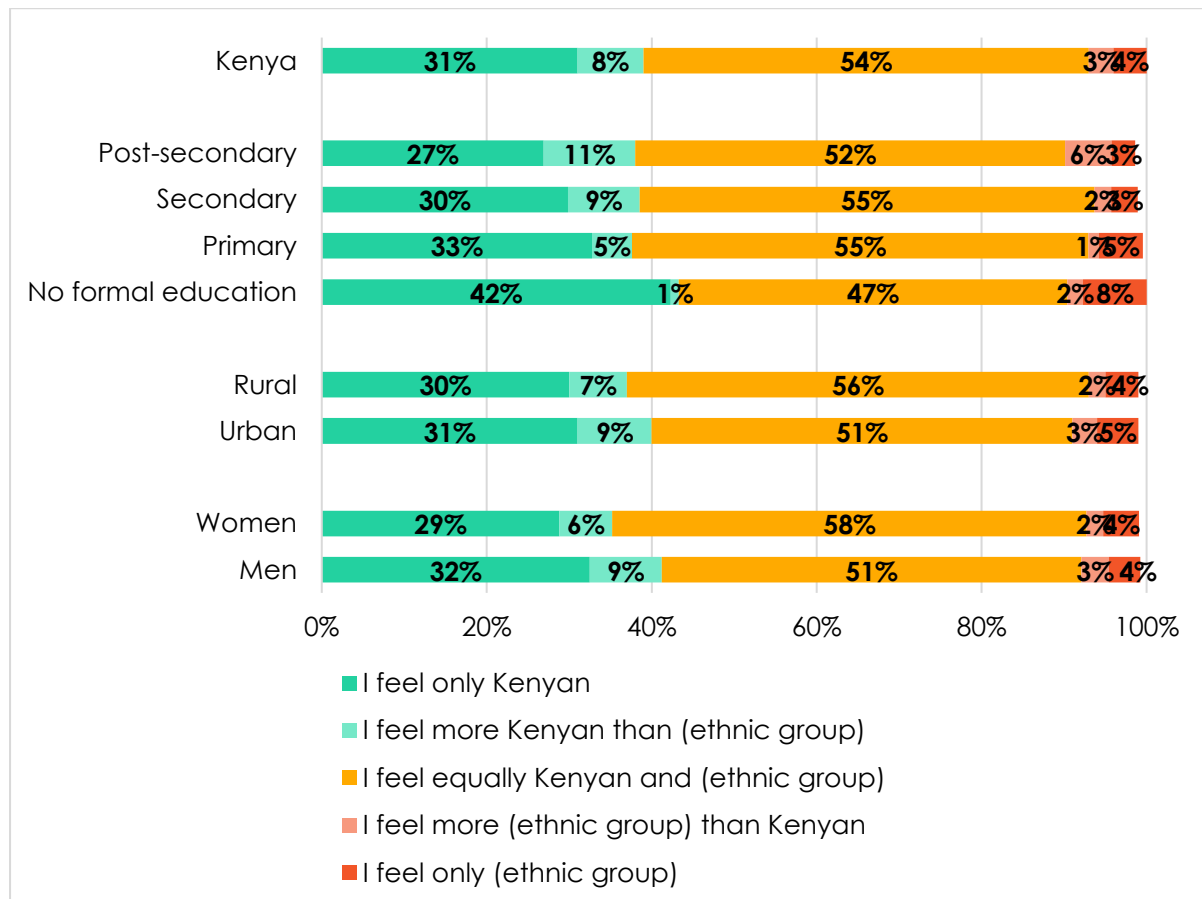
Kenya has 42 ethnic groups with different languages and cultures, which were colonially brought under one jurisdiction and socialized to operate as a nation. Kiswahili and English, which are national languages, link the diverse ethnic groups with respect to communication and interaction. The unifying aspect of these two languages is reflected in Afrobarometer surveys, in which most citizens opt to be interviewed in either Kiswahili or English rather than their ethnic language. During the most recent survey, 66% of Kenyans chose to be interviewed in Kiswahili and 33% opted for English, while only nine out of 2,400 respondents (0.4%) preferred a local language (Somali).

An overwhelming majority (93%) of Kenyans identify at least as much with their nation as with their ethnic group (Figure 1). More than half (54%) say they feel equally Kenyan and ethnic, while four in 10 say they feel exclusively Kenyan (31%) or more Kenyan than ethnic (8%).

Interestingly, self-identification as “only Kenyan” decreases as respondents’ education level increases, dropping from 42% of those with no formal education to 27% of those with post-secondary qualifications. This is counter-intuitive and requires further research, as one might expect less educated citizens to have less exposure to other cultures and stronger ethnic feelings than citizens with more education.

The tendency to value national and ethnic identities equally is more common among those with primary education and above, among rural residents, and among women. Other differences by demographic group are modest. Overall, while few Kenyans (4%) identify only with their ethnic group, about seven in 10 (69%) consider their ethnic group at least a part of their makeup.

**Figure 1: Citizens' choice of identity: ethnic vs. Kenyan** | by demographic group  
 | Kenya | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Kenyan and being your ethnic group. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

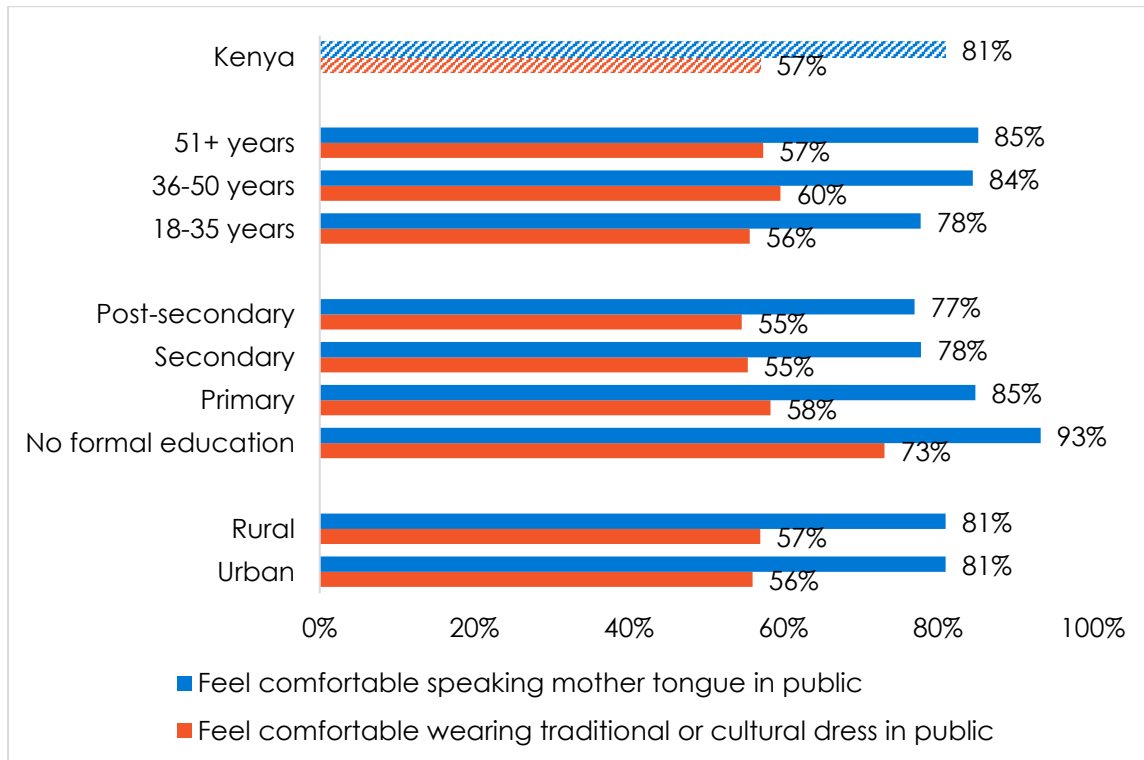
Although scholars argue that ethnicity is fluid and difficult to define (Berman, 1998; Spear & Waller, 1993), a majority of Kenyans clearly value their ethnic identities. These attachments come into play in social and political interactions, including competition and negotiation for resources controlled by the state and external agents (Lynch, 2007). The question of which ethnic groups control state and development resources is an issue that confronts Kenyans on a daily basis and comes into high focus in electoral politics, where activated emotions are turned into “us vs. them” ethnic tensions by political parties organized along ethnic lines.

Alliances among political parties can help reduce such tensions through the formation of a new identity, perhaps balancing national and ethnic identities, that is useful for political bargaining and expected access to goods and services.

Language is an important aspect of identity, and ethnic languages are given a high premium by Kenya citizens. Eight in 10 respondents (81%) say they feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue in public, including more than three-fourths across all educational levels

and age groups, with very little difference between urban and rural locations or genders (Figure 2). Comfort in speaking one's mother tongue is highest among those with no formal education (93%), probably reflecting their tendency to live and work within their ethnic communities, which can often help newcomers in urban areas with initial accommodations and employment opportunities in the informal economy.

**Figure 2: Citizens' level of comfort speaking mother tongue and wearing traditional dress in public** | by demographic group | Kenya | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel comfortable: Speaking your mother tongue in public? Wearing your traditional or cultural dress in public?

As might be expected, young people are somewhat less likely to feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue than their elders (78% of those aged 18-35 years vs. 84%-85% of older respondents).

A smaller majority (57%) of Kenyans also say they feel comfortable wearing traditional or cultural dress in public, with response patterns similar to those about language, including the highest score by respondents with no formal education (73%).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kenya does not have cultural attire as such. Over the years Kenyans have adopted colonial dress and a mixture of other attires, including English suit and tie in Parliament and for official occasions in both the public and private sectors. In 2004, Kenya attempted to introduce a traditional national dress as a symbol of national identity, but the project was a total failure. It involved procuring a National Dress Design Team through a design competition – close to an impossible task, since the team had to take into consideration all 42 ethnic groups and bring out attire for both women and men that represented Kenyan identity. The “Sunlight Kenya National Dress” that emerged included a cloak with an apron embellished with beadwork for women and a shirt with one-sided kimono-like sleeves for men, all to be capped with headgear. It was widely dismissed as borrowing heavily from Nigeria’s national garment and lacking Kenyan authenticity.

## Identity and unfair treatment

Scholars argue that ethnicity is not a problem unless it is activated for undesirable ends (Brass, 1991; Mitullah, 2002; Barreto, 2011). In Kenya, as in many other African countries, such activation occurs when people are treated unequally based on their ethnicity with respect to access to resources and services (Ilorah, 2009).

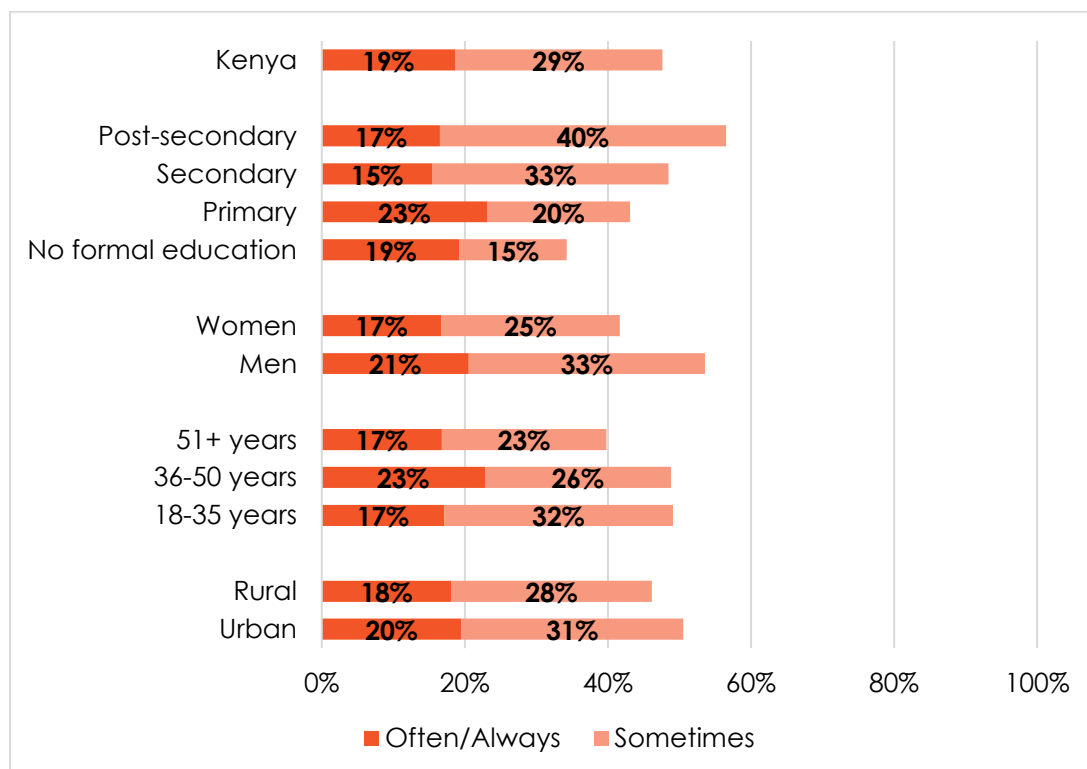
### Ethnicity

A survey question asking citizens how often the government treats their ethnic group unfairly yielded mixed responses. While about half (49%) of the population say that members of their ethnic group “never” experience unfair treatment by the government, two in 10 (19%) say this occurs “often” or “always,” in addition to 29% who say “sometimes” (Figure 3).

The perception that their ethnic group is at least “sometimes” treated unfairly is higher among men (54%) than women (42%) and among urban residents (51%) compared to their rural counterparts (46%). It increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 34% among those with no formal education to 57% among those with post-secondary qualifications, and is more common among those aged 18-50 (49%) than among their elders (40%).

These differences may be related to opportunities to compete for goods and services. For example, the less-educated, rural residents, women, and senior citizens may be less likely to have a chance to compete for jobs, promotions, and other rewards, and thus less likely to encounter ethnic bias.

**Figure 3: Unfair treatment of ethnic groups by government** | by demographic group | Kenya | 2019



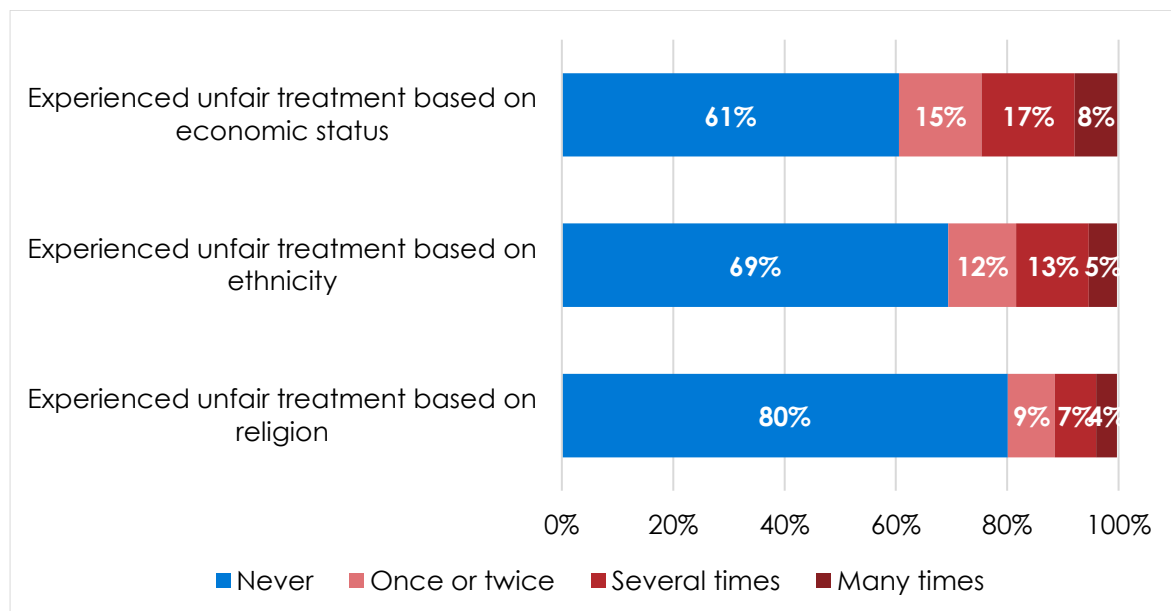
**Respondents were asked:** How often, if ever, are [members of your ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

A similar proportion of Kenyans say they experienced unfair treatment by other Kenyans on the basis of their ethnicity. Almost one-fifth of respondents say this happened “many times” (5%) or “several times” (13%) during the year preceding the survey, in addition to 12% who say they encountered it “once or twice” (Figure 4).

Ethnic groups in Kenya are largely tolerant of one another in everyday social life but often depart from this norm when issues of resource allocation and services are brought into the equation. The country's 2010 Constitution attempted to overcome historical disparities that marginalized some areas and communities, in part by embracing devolved participatory governance for all 47 counties. Kenya's counties are largely occupied by specific ethnic groups, and each county is allocated a budget. In addition, the Constitution provides for an equalization fund aimed at providing basic services to marginalized areas for 20 years.

These efforts are beginning to bridge resource gaps that have been triggers for ethnic animosity, although contention over revenue division across counties persists. In 2020, for example, revenue sharing for the 47 counties stalled in the Senate due to its inability to reach consensus on a formula.

**Figure 4: Unfair treatment by other Kenyans | Kenya | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In the past year, how often, if ever, have you personally been treated unfairly by other Kenyans based on: Your economic status, that is, how rich or poor you are? Your religion? Your ethnicity?

### Religion and economic status

Fewer citizens report experiencing unfair treatment based on their religion; 20% say this happened at least once during the previous year (Figure 4). While some religious institutions provide certain goods and services, such as health care and schooling, these often target the poor, and instances of discrimination based on religious faith are probably isolated and not widely known.

One aspect of religion that requires further research is the inability of politicians to activate religion as an identity for political mobilization. Politicians in Kenya work hard to get close to religious leaders in search of political support and votes, especially during elections, but

these efforts have tended to remain at the religious leadership level without affecting how the religious leaders treat their followers and how their followers interact with one another.

However, unfair treatment based on economic status was somewhat more frequent: One-fourth (25%) of respondents say they suffered this “several times” or “many times,” while 15% say it happened “sometimes.” This may be tied to a perception that the affluent are able to leverage their networks, information, and resources to gain further advantages, whether in terms of better goods and services or preferential treatment by corrupt officials. Reports of unfair treatment based on economic status are somewhat more common in urban areas (where 29% say “several times” or “many times”) than in rural areas (22%), and they increase with respondents’ education level, ranging from 17% of those with no formal schooling to 29% of those with post-secondary education.

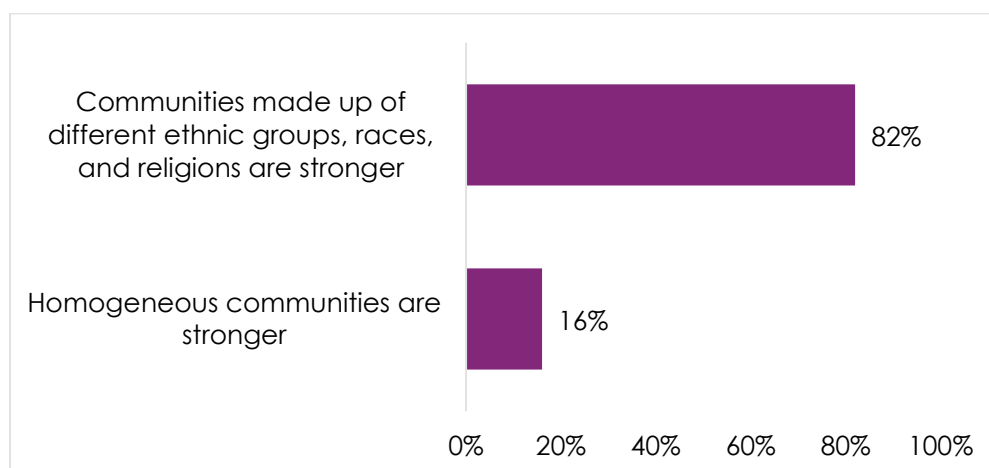
### Tolerance and trust

The identity prism of “us vs. them” – whether with respect to economic status, ethnic group, or religion – places Kenyans in difficult situations. Over the years, Kenya has experienced conflicts triggered by activated emotions related to ethnicity and socio-economic status, whether in historically disadvantaged communities or regions, during competition for limited resources such as water and pasture, or as part of political competition among leaders looking for support and votes. For example, post-election violence in 2007 was triggered by historical grievances related to land, privileges, and inequalities among ethnic groups (Government of Kenya, 2008; Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2009). Besides this major crisis, perennial ethnic tensions exist over allocation of resources, including over grazing areas and watering points for pastoralists.

Despite these tensions, Kenyans overwhelmingly (82%) say that communities made up of different ethnic groups, races, and religions are stronger than more homogeneous communities (Figure 5).

And almost two-thirds (64%) say there is more that unites Kenyans than divides them (Figure 6).

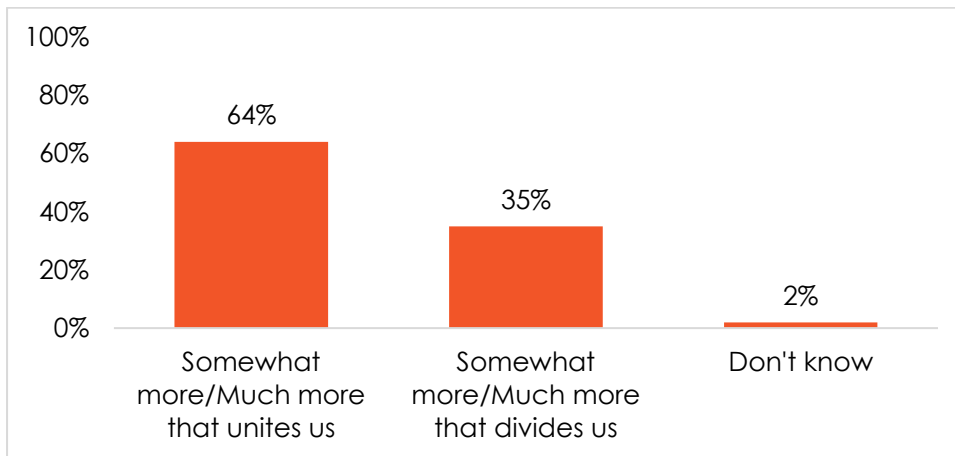
**Figure 5: Diverse vs. homogeneous communities: Which are stronger? | Kenya | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people from different ethnic groups, races, or religions.  
 Statement 2: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people who are similar to each other, that is, people from the same ethnic group, race, or religion.  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)



**Figure 6: More that unites or divides Kenyans? | Kenya | 2019**



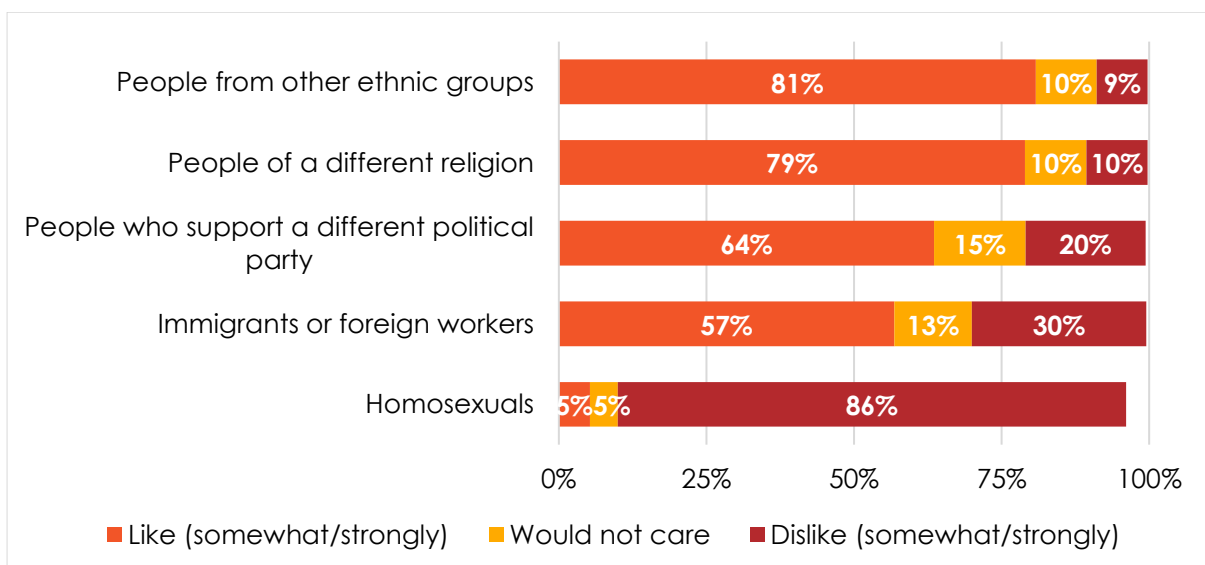
**Respondents were asked:** Overall, would you say that there is more that unites all Kenyans as one people, or more that divides them?

In line with these sentiments, most Kenyans express tolerant attitudes toward people from different ethnic groups (91%) and religious backgrounds (89%), saying they “would strongly like it,” “would somewhat like it,” or “would not care” if they had such people as neighbours. Strong majorities also express tolerance toward people who support different political parties (79%) and immigrants and foreign workers (70%) (Figure 7).

One notable exception is widespread intolerance for people of a different sexual orientation; only one in 10 Kenyans (10%) say they would not mind living next door to a homosexual person.

The country's high score on ethnic tolerance supports the narrative that Kenyans have no problems with other ethnic groups unless latent xenophobia is activated by competition for resources or political power.

**Figure 7: Social tolerance | Kenya | 2019**

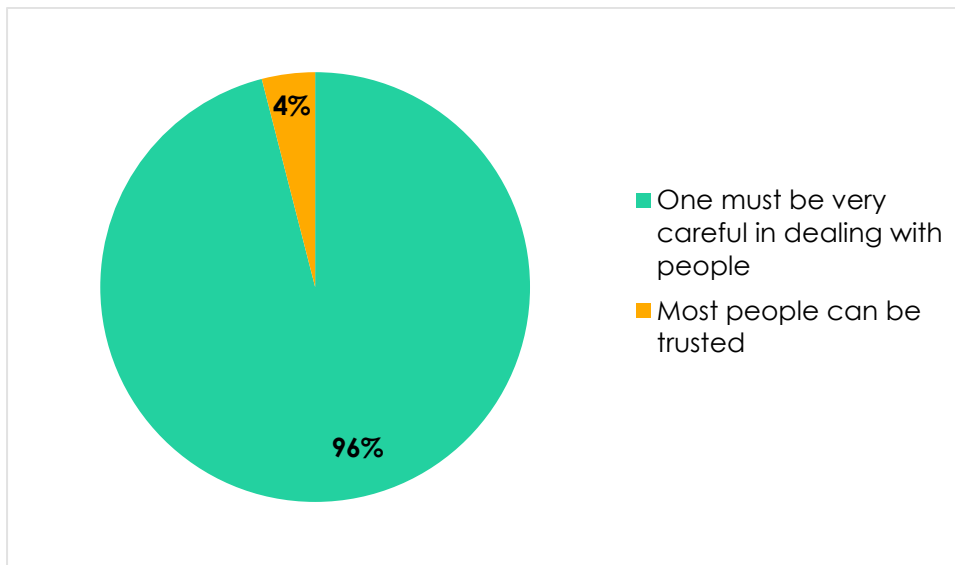


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care.



Tolerance and trust are related attributes that are crucial for harmonious living. They enhance a sense of community and of working together for livelihoods and sustainable development. Both are built over time as communities relate and share resources. Unfortunately, Kenyans do not trust one another very much: An overwhelming 96% say that one “must be very careful” in dealing with others, while only 4% believe that “most people can be trusted” (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Can other people be trusted? | Kenya | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you must be very careful in dealing with people?

The Afrobarometer survey did not probe reasons for this lack of trust, but a lack of transparency, a lack of accountability, and skewed resource allocation during Kenya's many years of one-party rule may well have contributed to a legacy of mistrust, for the state as well as for fellow citizens.

### Implications of identity, tolerance, and trust

Identity is an intersectional variable that takes form depending on the positions and situations of individuals and groups. While ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and political identities tend to be overarching, citizens and groups have many other identities that they manage in their daily lives and in their engagement with the state.

Ethnicity is perhaps the most frequently highlighted identity when it comes to tolerance and trust, and yet the most complex to understand. Colonial administrators clustered 42 ethnic groups into specific administrative units, which cemented group identification and the natural tendency to consider those outside the jurisdiction outsiders. This identification became both cognitive and geographical.

At the same time, some communities whose land had been appropriated by the colonial government were pushed into new geographical locations not dominated by their ethnic groups. These communities, along with individuals who purchased land in areas not dominated by their ethnic groups, are viewed as outsiders whenever ethnic emotions are activated, even if they have lived with the “insiders” for decades. They suffer both cognitive and geographical dispossession in an atmosphere of intolerance and mistrust, with dire consequences of conflict and death.

Survey data show that most Kenyans express ethnic tolerance. However, the lack of trust among citizens is worrying and can be a threat to harmonious living. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 calls for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies by building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. This cannot be achieved when other members of a community are viewed as “outsiders,” a perception that often results in marginalization, insecurity, and deprivation of rights and opportunities.

A related problem, less often highlighted, is disparity in the socio-economic status of individuals and groups. A capitalist society may associate poverty with lack of effort, but it is far more strongly associated with marginalization, including ethnic marginalization. Individuals who belong to marginalized ethnic groups tend to be economically deprived. They have neither the resources needed to access private services nor the ethnic leverage advantage to access public resources and services. These resource gaps activate identity emotions that trigger intolerance and lack of trust and undermine social cohesion.

Identity emotions may also be raised if immigrants or foreign workers, though generally tolerated, are seen as competing with Kenyans for jobs or other resources. Some Chinese immigrants, for example, have been attacked for investing in small-scale enterprises, which are widely viewed as the domain of Kenyan citizens (BBC, 2019; Iraki, 2012), or for allegedly mistreating Kenyan workers (China Africa Project, 2020).

Religious tolerance has been the norm in Kenya, notwithstanding local or state-level disputes, e.g. over abortion rights in the 2010 Constitution, the Kadhi court system enforcing certain inheritance, family, and succession rights among Muslims (Ndzovu, 2013), the national observance of Islamic holidays, and government apprehension of some indigenous religious groups that discourage their members from using modern medical services. The “insider-outsider” logic is not dominant in religious affiliation. Tolerance does not constitute a threat to one’s own rights, safety, access to resources, and religious beliefs. This is very different from the case of ethnicity and socio-economic status, which can easily translate to disadvantages in access to resources.

It also differs from political party affiliation, a fickle identity that mostly pops up during elections but is also to a large extent tied to ethnic identity. Intolerance during elections may be fanned by agents of political parties, especially in regions that are strongholds of particular parties, and individuals affiliated with a non-dominant party may be exposed to hostility, eviction, even the burning of their homesteads.

Perhaps nowhere does intolerance mark Kenya as it does with regard to sexual identity. While Article 27(4) of the Constitution (Government of Kenya, 2010) guarantees equality and freedom from all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation, many political and religious leaders as well as ordinary citizens continue to hold negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Often these attitudes are said to be based on moral beliefs, which are deeply rooted and take long to change. Progress is beginning to occur in some African countries, as more individuals and groups declare their identities and demand recognition in law and practice. Kenya has made a start in declaring sexual discrimination unconstitutional, though it has far to go with respect to operationalizing the principle.

## **Conclusion**

The Afrobarometer Round 8 survey reveals that Kenya can still do more to bridge tolerance and trust gaps that can undermine peace, security, and sustainable development. To do so, it is important to understand how issues of identity manifest in real-life situations. While identity is a self-categorization in particular groups or roles, social identity is based on contexts within which the identity may be activated – for positive or negative purposes.

In Kenya, ethnic and economic identities are often activated as individuals and groups compete for resources and services. The Constitution recognizes this by providing for two levels of government, national and county, with an aim of ensuring a fair distribution of resources. However, the fruits of this new dispensation are still to be fully operationalized for harmonious living among communities.

While essentially positive attributes, identities require monitoring and management to ensure fairness and harmony. Different religious affiliations and political loyalties enrich society if tolerant attitudes are the norm. The same is true of foreign workers if protocols and practices are fair to both immigrants and citizens. Tolerance toward different sexual identities is an area where Kenya needs to do a lot of citizen education in order to operationalize what the Constitution already guarantees. Strengthening tolerance toward Kenya's multitude of identities may help build the trust in which its citizens are so sorely lacking.

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**Winnie V. Mitullah** is a research professor at the University of Nairobi Institute for Development Studies. Email: [mitullahwinnie@gmail.com](mailto:mitullahwinnie@gmail.com).

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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