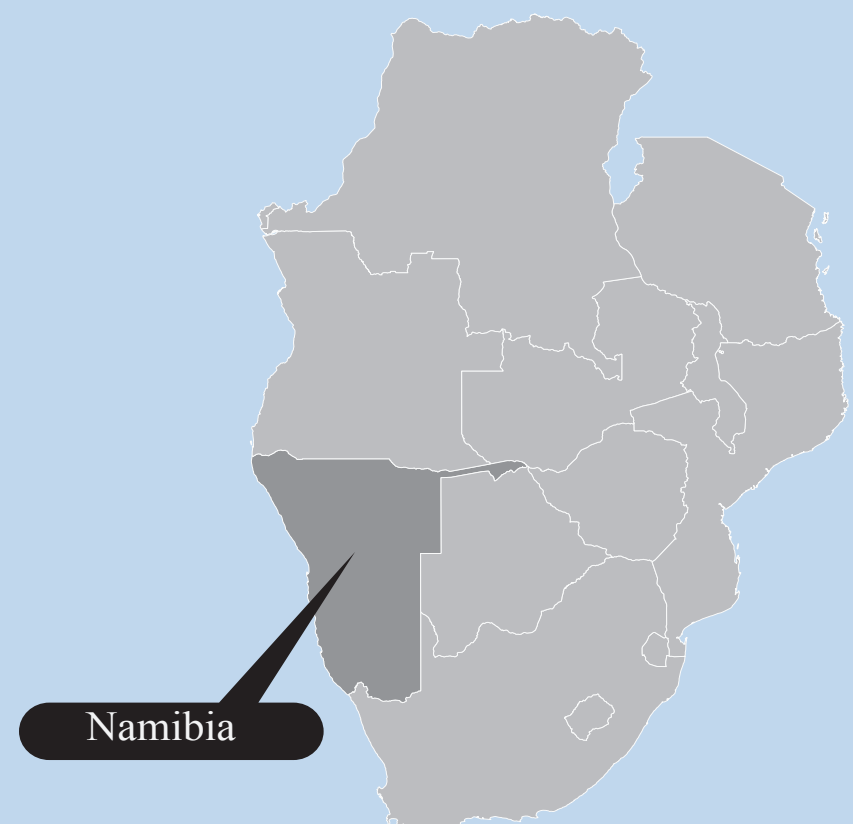




SOPHIE CAPSHAW-MACK
Class of 2017
Winston-Salem, NC

There I stood, alone, atop a mountain of sand that took an hour to scale. I was exploring the Namib Desert, a place boasting the world's highest and arguably most magnificent sand dunes. The sky was bigger and bluer than any I had seen. Golden dunes skimmed the horizon, their smooth slopes folding and curving into one another. I stood up there for some time, soaking in the view and reflecting on how far I had come—in more ways than one.

CONTINUED ►



Sophie Capshaw-Mack

EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: A STUDY OF GENDER PARITY IN NAMIBIA

I was over 7,000 miles away from home living in Namibia, a country most people back in North Carolina could barely pronounce; assuming they had even heard of it. Formerly known as South-West Africa, Namibia was colonized by Germany in 1884 as part of Europe's "Scramble for Africa." After World War I, it was placed under South African sovereignty. Only in 1990 did Namibia gain its independence. I landed in the capitol, Windhoek.

There, I partnered with the pan-African NGO, Forum for African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA). The organization works with the Namibian Ministry of Education

to eradicate gender disparities in the national education system. FAWENA's reach is tremendous: they provide

bursaries for children across the country, reintegrate teen mothers into school, empower victims of gender-based violence, and sustain microfinance programs for women in rural villages, among other projects.

My role was to produce a documentary showing FAWENA's efforts toward achieving gender equality. What I did not realize was the invaluable impact the experience would have on my life—specifically, my recovery. My life changed a month before my trip. My life changed because I was raped. In the following weeks, I experienced an array of emotions. But, mostly I felt broken. Despite everything, I still wanted to travel to Namibia. My motivations to fight gender inequality deepened in ways I could never before imagine. I wanted to hear other women's stories because I could not yet bear my own. FAWENA gave me a reason to keep going. FAWENA is headquartered in the Ministry of Education building, so I had the privilege to participate in government meetings concerning education policy and gender equality. I stood out because I was the youngest

in attendance and generally the only Caucasian and Westerner present. These meetings afforded me a rare look into the mechanisms driving development. I witnessed the collaborative efforts between the Namibian government, United Nations' programs, and NGOs.

Though Namibia boasts a progressive constitution and democratic government, the challenge to combatting inequality rests less in the laws themselves, than in their implementation. High rates of gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy are Namibia's greatest obstacles. These concerns largely result from unequal

power between sexes, a discrepancy aggravated by poverty and lack of education. No singular solution exists for such a pervasive issue as gender inequality. For this reason, FAWENA has enacted a multi-sectoral approach.

FAWENA initiatives ensure female participation within all levels of society, while promoting safe and accessible environments conducive for the instruction of female and male students alike. The organization encourages community involvement through workshops that unite students, teachers and parents.

Some of my favorite memories are from the rural villages in the Kavango region where FAWENA hosted these workshops. The villages are comprised of homesteads, where families reside in thatched-roof huts and live off of subsistence farming. It took more than 9 hours to reach Shinyungwe village for a community discussion on barriers to education. Located an hour from the nearest town and only accessible via dirt road, Shinyungwe is as rural as it gets. Giraffes towered in the distance, and a herd of elephants crossed the road less than 50 yards in front of us. Teenage pregnancy rates soar in rural villages, leaving mothers with few options. In Nkurenkuru, FAWENA hosted a retreat for teen mothers as part of the organization's re-entry program. The project helps young



mothers return to school and provides financial and emotional support. I met and interviewed these remarkable young mothers, and was astonished by their courage and determination.

Ultimately, my journey to Namibia taught me that people are defined not by their circumstances, but by how they face them. Shame and stigma too often silence victims of gender-based violence around the world. I refuse to be silent. I want to help survivors of sexual assault in honor of the women in Namibia who helped me. Weeks after being raped, I ventured to the other side of the globe, alone, and embarked on a journey of discovery. I gained friends as close as family, sang karaoke at a packed club, and ran a half marathon through the bush. One night, I ditched my vegetarianism to try zebra, crocodile and antelope (terrible idea in retrospect). I went four-wheeling across the desert and watched endangered black rhinos butt horns at twilight.

In my project proposal, I identified one of my goals as listening to the voices of Namibian women and sharing their stories with the world. Ironically, they helped me face my own story.



As I stood atop that sand dune in the Namib Desert, I thought of this irony, of the strength and courage I gained thanks to the incredible people I met along the way. Namibia gave me the most precious gift of all—my voice.