

Anti-Slavery International has been working to address descent-based slavery in Mauritania since 1995, and has run anti-slavery projects in a close partnership with the Mauritanian organization SOS-Esclaves since the latter gained official legal status in 2005. The following intervention to support the communication “*Minority Rights Group International and SOS-Esclaves on behalf of Said Ould Salem and Yarg Ould Salem Vs The Islamic Republic of Mauritania*” is therefore based on Anti-Slavery International’s 20+ years of experience working directly with slave descendants and slavery survivors, and the accounts given by them anecdotally or documented as case studies.

Slavery based on descent remains widespread in Mauritania, particularly among Berber-Arabs known as ‘White Moors’.[[1]](#footnote-1) These traditionally nomadic groups historically raided and enslaved people from sedentary black ethnic groups from along the Senegal River. Slaves were assimilated into Moor tribes, and ownership of slaves was passed down within the same families through the generations. Over the centuries, the majority have ended up being released, escaping, or settling away from their masters, but they still bear the status of ‘slave’ and form a social class known as the Haratine (or ‘Black Moors’). Haratine are now estimated to constitute over 40% of the population, and largely remain among the poorest and most marginalized people in Mauritania.[[2]](#footnote-2) White Moors are the dominant ethnic group, and are a majority in the government, judiciary, military and police and other positions of power.

Many descendants of slaves remain in slavery to this day, under the full control of their traditional masters. They are treated as property, and receive no payment for their work. Men primarily herd cattle or work on their masters’ farmland, while women are mostly engaged in domestic work, carrying and nursing the master’s children and often shepherding animals. Girls and boys start work for their masters at a very young age. Their domestic duties include drawing water from wells, collecting firewood, cooking, washing clothes, cleaning, caring for the children of their master, and setting up and moving tents. People in slavery typically face verbal and physical abuse. Girls and women are often sexually abused and raped by their masters. The children of slaves are also considered the masters’ property and, like other slaves, can be rented out, loaned, given as gifts in marriage or inherited by the masters’ children. After a visit to Mauritania in November 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery Gulnara Shahinian described slavery in Mauritania as a “*slow, invisible process which results in the social death of many thousands of women and men*”[[3]](#footnote-3).

Slavery was first criminalized in 2007 in Mauritania, and a revised law containing stronger penalties was passed in 2015. However, the existence of slavery is regularly denied by the Mauritanian authorities[[4]](#footnote-4), and slavery survivors are rarely supported by the authorities in attempts to file slavery claims and seek justice. Indeed, because the administration, police and judiciary largely belong to the same social group as the slave-owning families (and may have slave-owning connections themselves), there is real resistance to enforcing the law.[[5]](#footnote-5)

People leaving slavery face a number of barriers to the full respect for their rights, and children (defined in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as referring to: “every human being below the age of 18 years) are at a particular disadvantage. They are at risk of recapture by masters or attempts from others to coerce them back into slavery, so they generally need to leave the area where their masters live, or seek protection locally. For children, their earlier stage of physical and mental development places them at greater risk of being physically restrained or psychologically pressured. A return to slavery often involves brutal physical punishment, especially when masters wish to make an example of them. Slavery entails a state of social isolation which prevents victims from having the support networks to facilitate escape. Children, who are usually separated from their parents from a young age expressly to prevent the forming of kinship bonds, are particularly unlikely to have social connections or the knowledge of organizations for assistance.

For those who do manage to leave their masters, survival is a constant preoccupation. Again, children are even less likely than adults to have skills or resources to help them live independently. Those leaving slavery do not have access to water, food and shelter, so hunger and homelessness are a reality for most slavery survivors, unless they find someone to help. The negative stereotypes attached to ‘slaves’ often prevent people from helping them (combined with the social stigma of helping slaves to leave influential families). Their overwhelming multitude of needs might also prevent people from becoming involved. Local authorities are typically unable or unwilling to offer support; sometimes allusion is made to referrals to the central Tadamoun Agency, but no support has ever come from Tadamoun via the local authorities. The Tadamoun Agency has offered stipends or handouts to fewer than 10 victims of slavery, but only on an ad-hoc basis, after intensive lobbying from the anti-slavery organization SOS-Esclaves at the national level.

The total destitution in which people find themselves leaves them (especially children) highly vulnerable to further exploitation (including sexual exploitation). Girls in slavery are often subjected to rape and sexual violence, and other men they encounter on leaving slavery may also view them and treat them as sexual property. Additionally, girls may have children themselves, which involves additional economic and care responsibilities and stigma (given socio-cultural and potentially legal sanctions on sex outside of marriage).

For those who do find sources of support in the short-term (usually family members who are no longer in slavery, or anti-slavery organizations), the lack of identity documents creates a huge barrier to access to State services. Indeed, to obtain ‘civil status’, the applicant must provide parents’ details, which are often unknown to young victims of slavery. Children therefore have difficulty accessing education; they are often years behind other children, so need time to catch up before they can integrate into formal schools, but public schooling beyond the age of 10 is only available to those with identity cards. This perpetuates children’s social isolation and disempowerment; it prevents them access to the key opportunity to break the generational cycle of poverty and exploitation. Without schooling, children emerging from slavery’s prospects in life remain limited.

Options for economic activity to allow self-sufficiency are also narrow. The skills of people in slavery are generally limited to domestic work and herding. Children who have grown up in rural areas are not accustomed to urban settings, and they have little confidence with basic life skills, such as handling money. Therefore, they generally require intensive support before they can cope with independent living.

Slavery is inherently dehumanising and traumatic. Victims are denied all their rights as human beings and treated as property, whose sole purpose is service to the masters. They are deprived of all choice, agency and sense of self-worth. People in slavery also inherit generational legacies of abuse and trauma. Notions of their own inferiority (and the superiority of others) are deeply ingrained. Even when they have made the courageous move to leave slavery, people emerging from slavery usually lack the capacity and confidence to make choices and live autonomously; they often become highly dependent on the organization or individual supporting them. Attempts to do so are continually undermined by the discrimination prevalent in Mauritania’s hierarchical society; ‘slaves’ are widely reviled and held in contempt, and mechanisms for support or redress are rare. For children (and girls in particular), this dynamic is reinforced by cultural norms that require deference and subservience in relation to adults. Therefore children are even less likely to develop the psychological capacities needed to assert themselves and thrive independently. The Mauritanian authorities fail to take appropriate actions to protect and support people leaving slavery, including children, and there are no additional safeguards or redress for child victims whose cases are brought before them.

1. Various ethnic groups in Mauritania have a tradition of slavery that still results in discrimination and exploitation of the ‘slave class’ within those groups, but the ‘ownership’ of people is not exercised to the same extent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Estimates from the Embassy of the US Government, Mauritania. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, on her mission to Mauritania (24 October-4 November 2009), 24 August 2010, A/HRC/15/20/Add.2, summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, 24 August 2010, A/HRC/15/20/Add.2, § 33 ; see also the interviews of government’s officials in the CNN digital documentary on Mauritania, March 2012, [http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/category/ mauritania-slaverys-last- stronghold/](http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/category/mauritania-slaverys-last-%20stronghold/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also: <http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/MRG_Rep_Maur2_Nov15_ENG_2.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)