

# Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in Mauritania and the Status of Modern Slavery



The Inclusivity Project and Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and  
Descent - 2023

## **The Inclusivity Project**

The Inclusivity Project (TIP) is a non-profit organization founded to advocate for the rights of communities discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) and raise awareness on their issue. TIP works towards capacity building, collaboration, and research to support CDWD communities by enhancing the social, economic, and political integration and increasing their visibility at the national, regional and global platforms. TIP works on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially on the monitoring and follow-up/review, and providing data and evidence for the nation-state for effective and inclusive programme implementation.

<https://www.theinclusivityproject.org/>

## **Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent**

The Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFOD) is the global coordination and engagement mechanism for the Stakeholder Group of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (SG CDWD). Both were founded in 2021 and formally recognize the core motto of 'Leave No One Behind' propounded by Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which ensures Planet, Peace and Prosperity for all, especially those who are marginalized through generations and suffered social prejudices.

<https://www.globalforumcdwd.org/>

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# Mauritania

Mauritania, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, is an Arab-African country located northwest of Africa, between the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Black Africa. It is a member of the African Union, the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Organisation for the Development of the Senegal River (OMVS) and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF).

Most of the country's surface area lies in the Sahara desert. It borders with the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Western Sahara (claimed by Morocco) and Morocco to the north and northwest, Algeria to the northeast, Mali to the east and southeast, and Senegal to the southwest. The country's geographical position makes it a point of contact between North and sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in a multi-ethnic composition.





Mauritania's estimated population is 4,372,037 million, comprising 53 per cent females and 47 per cent males<sup>12</sup>, resulting in a sex ratio of 100.95 males per 100 females. Children aged 0-17 make up over half of the country's population (50.7%).<sup>13</sup>

According to government data released in 2023, more than 2.3 million people in Mauritania live in multidimensional poverty, accounting for 56.9 per cent of the population. This means they are deprived in various aspects, including education, health, living standards, and employment, with an average deprivation rate of 56.3 per cent across these indicators.

The most vulnerable group comprises of children aged 0 to 17, who make up over half of the population (50.7%). Among them, 61.9 per cent live in multi-dimensional poverty, the highest rate compared to other age groups. Rural areas are particularly affected, with 77.1 per cent of the rural population living in multidimensional poverty, making them significant areas of concern that require attention from the government. Additionally, the Human Development Report (HDR) of 2022 indicates that approximately 26.3 per cent of the population is living in severe multidimensional poverty.

Over 63 per cent of the working population is engaged in primary sector (agriculture, fishing, and mining), the secondary sector employs 17 per cent of the working population, and the tertiary sector employs 21 per cent of the working population, which is 43.5 per cent of the total population.<sup>14</sup> Over 56.13 per cent of Mauritania's population lives in urban areas.

Mauritania is predominantly a Muslim country, with most of the population following the Sunni denomination. Atheism is punishable by death. Arabic is the official language, while Hassaniya, Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof languages are also commonly spoken. French is widely spoken as well.

In the 2021 Human Development Index, Mauritania is ranked 158 out of 191 countries and territories. Additionally, it holds the 161st position in the Gender Inequality Index.<sup>15</sup> Hratin (CDWD) are elected representatives in Parliament of 175 members in the newly elected Parliament (March 2023).

# Foreword



## Mohamed Yahya Ould Cire

**President of AHME (Association of Mauritanian Hratin in Europe )  
Doctor of Political Science, University of Paris II Assas-Panthéon.**

*Thesis: "The abolition of slavery in Mauritania and the difficulties of its application". This thesis was published by ANRT (Atelier National de Reproduction des Thèses), a French public institution responsible for publishing the best theses.*

**T**his cartographic study on the situation of communities discriminated against on the basis of work and descent, and on the practice of slavery in its traditional and modern forms, aims to inform national and international opinion on social inequalities in Mauritania and the discrimination suffered by these communities.

This report, created by Mauritanian experts from the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD), Alioune Mzeirigue Sidi, Cheikh Sidati Hamadi, Zenabou Brahim, and Ali Dieng, reflects their extensive research and experience in human rights activism.

Their collaboration with the GFoD has enabled them to strengthen their advocacy skills, by taking part in training workshops, conferences and forums on discrimination in the world and CDWD in Mauritania, particularly the Hratin, Komo (Soninke), Maccudo (Pular) and other groups and castes.

Their work benefited from contributions and advice from GFoD experts, as well as suggestions from international experts and Mauritanian human rights NGOs. Despite the enormous challenges related to sensitivity of this subject, the information lockdown, and the lack of reliable sources and statistics, this team succeeded in producing this work, which will serve as a watering

hole for the issues facing the Hratin community and other discriminated communities.

I have no doubt that this research work will shed light on the situation of the Hratin people and all other communities discriminated against on the basis of work and descent and help to better understand them, in the eyes of national and international opinion.

It is to be hoped that the analysis and recommendations contained in this report will help Mauritania to catalyze energies and investments to combat discrimination based on work and descent, and to implement the legal arsenal incriminating all forms of servitude and human rights violations.

# Preface



**N. Paul Divakar**  
Convenor, Global Forum of  
Communities Discriminated on  
Work and Descent

In the heart of West Africa lies the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, a nation known for its diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage. However, beneath the surface of this enchanting land lies a deeply rooted issue that continues to cast a long and oppressive shadow on certain communities – discrimination based on work and descent.

This report endeavors to shed light on the plight of Hratin and other communities facing systematic discrimination in Mauritania, focusing on the intersections of work and descent as significant factors exacerbating their marginalization. The narratives woven within these pages aim to expose the harsh realities faced by these communities, delving into the historical context, socio-economic implications, and the persistent challenges they encounter on a daily basis.

Discrimination based on work and descent in Mauritania is a complex and deeply entrenched issue, one that has persisted for generations. The historical backdrop of slavery and caste-based systems has left an indelible mark on the socio-political fabric of the nation, creating a stratified society where certain communities are relegated to the margins. The enduring effects of these historical injustices manifest in various forms, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

Through firsthand accounts, interviews, and meticulous research, this report aims to amplify the voices of those who have long been silenced. By examining the multifaceted dimensions of discrimination based on work and descent, we aspire to foster a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by these communities and the urgent need for inclusive and equitable policies to rectify historical wrongs.

Furthermore, this report serves as a call to action for policymakers, civil society organizations, and the international community to address the systemic issues perpetuating discrimination in Mauritania. By engaging in constructive dialogue and advocating for positive change, we can collectively work towards dismantling the barriers that impede the progress and well-being of these marginalized communities.

May this report serve as a catalyst for change, inspiring meaningful conversations and actions that pave the way towards a more just and equitable future for all in Mauritania.

# Acknowledgements

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Furthermore, we would like to thank the organisations and individuals who provided significant information and support for this research. These include SOS-Esclaves, Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), Sahel Foundation, AFCE, FONADH at the national level, as well as Anti-Slavery International (ASI) and The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Without their generous contributions, this research would not have been possible.

Finally, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the participants in our study. Their willingness to share their time, experiences, and insights has been essential to the success of this project. We deeply appreciate their participation and the valuable contributions they have made.



# Glossary of Terms

*Hratin* are the formerly enslaved black African people and their descendants who continue to be victimised in the centuries-old descent-based slavery practice in Mauritania. Traditionally as so-called “slave-caste”, they formed the bottom-most rung of the hierarchical *Beidhane* (White Moors) society.

The *Hratin* in modern Mauritania consider to be distinct from the *Beidhane*. As part of the identity assertion of the *Hratin*, the report categorises the group separately.

*In a bid to recognise and affirm the identity of the Hratin people, this report respects the use of their language - Hassania. The correct spelling and pronunciation may thus be noted as : Hratin – plural form; Hartaniate - feminine, plural; Hartani - masculine, singular; Hartania - feminine, singular.*

## ■ Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD)

Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD) is the UN terminology for caste-based discrimination. The term has been used by several UN human rights bodies, including by treaty bodies and Special Rapporteurs, reaffirming that this form of discrimination is prohibited under international human rights law. DWD is a global phenomenon affecting 260 million people worldwide, including South Asia and East Asia, Africa, Latin America, Middle East and Europe.

## ■ Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD)

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) are the peoples directly affected by Discrimination based on Work and Descent. The communities discriminated on the basis of work and descent continue to face extreme forms of isolation and discrimination, which acts as an obstacle in their attainment of civil, political, economic and social rights. This form of stigma has led to their segregation and enforced endogamy, as well as socio-economic and political discrimination.

## ■ Modern Slavery

Modern Slavery covers a set of specific legal concepts including forced labour, concepts linked to forced labour (i.e., debt bondage, slavery and slavery like practices and human trafficking) and forced marriage. Although modern slavery is not defined in law, it is used as an umbrella term that focuses attention on commonalities across these legal concepts. Essentially, it refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.

## ABBREVIATIONS/ ACRONYMS

**AFCF:** Association of Women Heads of Households

**ANSADE:** National Agency for Statistics, Demographic and Economic Analysis

**CNDH:** The National Human Rights Commission

**EDSM:** Demographic and Health Survey in Mauritania

**GFOD:** Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

**ILO:** International Labour Organisation

**IOM:** International Organisation for Migration

**IRA:** Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement

**MAECME:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and Mauritians Abroad

**NGO:** Non-Government Organisation

**TAAZOUR:** General Delegate for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion

# Summary

**T**raditional slavery, as defined by the Slavery Convention of 1926, continues to persist in Mauritania, especially in rural areas. The lack of reliable data makes it difficult to estimate the number of people that are enslaved, but the emergence of ongoing legal cases on slavery indicates that the problem remains unresolved.

Descent-based slavery is deeply ingrained in Mauritanian society, which is highly stratified into three major cultural-ethnolinguistic groups: Beidhane, Hratin, and Afro-Mauritanian communities, also known as Black Africans, including Peuhls, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara communities. It is essential to acknowledge that all ethnic groups are practicing slavery. The hratin are most affected, followed by formerly enslaved individuals and occupational caste people of Soninké and Pulaar ethnic groups.

These communities formerly known as "slave-caste" and "occupational or artisan-caste" among the mentioned ethnic groups in Mauritania, constitute the "Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent" (CDWD). They experience multiple layers of discrimination, not only based on work and ancestry/descent but also on the basis of gender identity, disability, age, immigration, and other factors.

## THE CDWD WITHIN EACH ETHNIC GROUP INCLUDES:

**Beidhane - M'almine** (blacksmiths), **Iguawen** (griots), and **Hratin** (former slave-caste, who also identify separately)

**Pulaars - Maabo** or weavers, **Wambaabe** or griots, **Waylube** or metalworkers, **Sakebe** or shoemakers and **Laobés** or woodenware assembler. **The Maccudo** or slaves, at the bottom of the social class.

**Soninké** - The occupational or artisan caste was collectively known as - **Niakhamalas / Gnakhamalanous** and included the **Jaaro** (griots), blacksmiths, fisherfolk, weavers, jewellers and shoemakers, among others; followed by the **Komos** (slave-caste).

**Wolofs** - Occupational / artisan caste included - **Guewels** (griots), **Oudai** (leather workers), and **Tegg** (blacksmiths), among others. The **Diam** or slave-caste are at the bottom-most of the hierarchy.

**Bambara** - The occupational or artisan caste was collectively known as **Niamatélas**, and included- **Djeli** (griots) and **Noumou** (blacksmiths), among others.



## TOTAL ESTIMATED CDWD POPULATION



2,838,032 PERSONS OR 65% OF TOTAL POPULATION  
TOTAL ESTIMATED CDWD POPULATION



1,100,480 FEMALES OR 38.77% OF CDWD



973,520 MALES OR 34.30% OF CDWD



764,032 CHILDREN OR 26.93% OF CDWD

According to the local rights experts, the total CDWD population is estimated to be 2,838,032 persons, or 65 per cent of the total population. The female CDWD population is estimated at 1,100,480 persons (38.77% of CDWD population), male CDWD at 973,520 persons (34.30%) and child CDWD at 764,032 children (26.93%).<sup>1</sup>

According to the local rights experts, the total CDWD population is estimated to be 2,838,032 persons, or 65 per cent of the total population. With the Hratin population estimated at 1.9 million (more than 45% of country's population), the rest 0.9 million comprise the (a) occupational/artisan caste among Beidhane, (b) occupational/artisan caste among Afro Mauritians and (c) formerly enslaved-caste and descendants of Afro Mauritians.

While all CDWD are affected by descent-based slavery and discrimination, the Hratin - despite constituting the majority (more than 45%) of the population, are most affected by their historical ties to the "slave caste".

Historically, the Beidhane, also known as white Moors, raided and enslaved people from the indigenous black population, known as Hratin or the black Moors, who were subjected to lifelong unpaid service. Traditionally, individuals born to slaves were considered the property of their masters and could be given away as

gifts, sold, exchanged, or inherited by the master's children.

Although criminalised now, this practice continues in silence. Women, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual abuse by their "masters," and forced pregnancies are not uncommon. Due to limited livelihood options, many Hratin individuals remain with the families of the masters who "owned" their ancestors.

Estimates of people living in Mauritania vary widely, with local anti-slavery groups suggesting that over 725 760 people (18% of the total population) live in modern slavery, and over 62 per cent are considered "vulnerable" to modern slavery. According to the Global Slavery Index 2023, over 149,000 people live in modern slavery, with a prevalence rate of 32 out of every 1000 persons. Mauritania ranks third globally in modern slavery practices, following North Korea and Eritrea.

TAAZOUR (General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion) was established in 2021 by replacing TADAMOUN (National Agency for the Fight Against the Vestiges of Slavery, Inclusion, and the Fight Against Poverty). The process followed the national dialogue between the Mauritanian government, the opposition and Hratin leaders. TAAZOUR's role is to fight against slavery and its after-

**According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, over 149,000 people live in modern slavery, with a prevalence rate of 32 out of every 1000 persons. Mauritania ranks third globally in modern slavery practices, following North Korea and**



**Photo : Laobe man  
(woodenware assemblers,  
occupational caste inside the  
Pular ethnic group)**

effects and the repatriation, integration and reintegration of Mauritanian deportees in Senegal and Mali following the events of 1989 between Mauritania and Senegal.

In 2015, law 2015/031 was passed by the Parliament, recognising slavery as a crime against humanity and imposing increased prison sentences. However, despite this legislative arsenal, several thousand people, accounting for more than 18 per cent of the population according to NGOs, continue to be affected by this phenomenon, which is deeply entrenched within the social order, resembling a caste society, within Saharan and Black African tribal communities.

Despite the existence of a substantial legal framework, slavery, slavery-like practices, discrimination, and modern slavery persist in Mauritania. Anti-slavery activists and human rights defenders are stigmatized, often facing prosecution, arrests and torture. The absence of official statistics on the ethnic groups, makes it a challenge to identify the CDWD among the Afro Mauritanian, hindering information on their particular difficulties, extent of suffering and so on.

The Hratin are constitutionally merged with the Moors, but owing to their racial distinctions, they are identifiable from the Moors. The other CDWD however, share similar physical features, skin colour, culture, and language, making it challenging to gather official and accurate data on their numbers, specific difficulties, and the extent of their suffering.

Nevertheless, their daily lives, geographical locations, discrimination cases, testimonies, and the work of human rights organisations have provided valuable information and actively contributed to raising awareness of the CDWD. Organisations such as Gambanaaxu for the Komo, Sos Esclave and Ira Mauritanie, le Flambeau de la liberte, El Hor (pioneer of Hratin emancipation movement), Fondation Sahel, have provided valuable information and data to raising the awareness of the CDWD.

Good mapping requires research and surveys conducted in collaboration with government programs, national governmental and non-governmental organizations in regular contact with the target populations, and international organizations such as WHO, UNFPA, ILO, and the World Bank for technical and financial assistance. Additionally, a genuine political will from the government is necessary for successful implementation.



Hratin Women, Mauritania

**This study highlights several critical points:**

1. The lack of information and statistics on Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) in Mauritania.
2. The absence of information on budgets allocated to vulnerable and discriminated groups such as the Hratin, M'almine, Iguawen, Komo, and Maccudo in Mauritania.
3. The similarity in the socio-economic living conditions of the Hratin, M'almine, Znagueu, Komo among the Soninké and other CDWD communities in Mauritania.
4. The lack of specific programs to support victims of slavery, discrimination, and modern slavery.
5. The lack of strong international reactions from the global community against the violence perpetrated against the Hratin and other CDWD, such as imposing international sanctions or embargoes.
6. The absence of a policy of positive discrimination in education and training for CDWD children in Mauritania.
7. The failure to enforce laws and regulations concerning violence and discrimination against Hratin and other CDWDs.
8. The role of caste role in determining socio-economic status in Mauritania.
9. The prevalence of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment among CDWD women, especially Hratin women.
10. The necessity of devising strategies for creating, implementing, and monitoring DWD programs in Mauritania.

# Recomendations

To fully eradicate all forms of discrimination against Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) and improve their living conditions, several essential steps are required, including:



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

**Experts on anti-slavery and anti-caste discrimination recognise the commonalities between Mauritania's traditional and contemporary forms of slavery, with features of "social stratification" based on "work" and "descent" resembling the concept of caste-based discrimination or Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD).**

Despite being officially abolished in 1981, slavery persists in Mauritania, particularly in the form of descent-based slavery deeply ingrained in the country's history and social fabric. Thousands of people are believed to be affected by descent-based slavery, which continues within Mauritania's ethnic communities, including the Hatin, Pulaars, Soninké, Wolof, and Bambara.

Estimates of people living in Mauritania vary widely, with local anti-slavery organisations suggesting that over 725 225 people (18% of the total population) live in modern slavery, and over 62 per cent are considered "vulnerable" to modern slavery.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, over 149,000 people live in modern slavery, with a prevalence rate of 32 out of every 1000 persons. Mauritania ranks third globally in modern slavery practices, following North Korea and Eritrea.<sup>3</sup>

The assignment of "occupation" or "work" to particular communities and the passing down of such work through "descent" essentially characterises the descent-based slavery in Mauritania as a caste-based or caste-like slavery system.

Essentially, "caste" is an endogamous system of social stratification that divides people based on their occupation/work and birth/descent.

It is deeply rooted in the Hindu caste system of India, spilling over to neighbouring countries in South Asia and worldwide through the South Asian diaspora.

Experts on anti-slavery and anti-caste discrimination recognise the commonalities between Mauritania's traditional and contemporary forms of slavery, with features of "social stratification" based on "work" and "descent" resembling the concept of caste-based discrimination or Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD).

'Discrimination based on Work and Descent' (DWD) is the UN terminology for caste-based discrimination. Several UN human rights bodies, including treaty bodies and Special Rapporteurs, have used the term, reaffirming that this form of discrimination is prohibited under international human rights law.

The communities formerly known as "slave-caste" and "occupational or artisan-caste" among the ethnic groups in Mauritania constitute the communities that are "Discriminated by Work and Descent" (DWD).

These communities experience multiple layers of discrimination, not only based on work and ancestry/descent but also on the basis of gender identity, disability, age, immigration, and other factors.



Laobe CDWD (woodcarvers)

**T**his study integrates evidence pointing to the identity of "caste" within ethnic groups as one of the predominant characteristics of modern slavery. Caste realities have also influenced other intersectional factors such as class, gender, and religion.

In 2015, 193 countries worldwide committed to achieving Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This commitment involves "taking immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and ensure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers by 2025."

The Inclusivity Project, in association with the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent and other like-minded networks, organisations, and individuals, has been vigorously advocating for "unifying a global identity" for the Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent. The Inclusivity Project has conducted a series of country-level and regional-level studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of "Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent" (DWD) in various forms of modern slavery and slavery-like practices.

The present study, titled 'Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in Mauritania and Status of Modern Slavery', is part of the consolidated Status Report for Africa region.

## Methodology

This study collates evidence gathered through desk research of existing studies, news articles, court cases, and judgments. Interviews were conducted with affected communities as well as non-DWD groups. Interviews with local rights groups and individuals working on eliminating descent-based slavery were also conducted. The study also draws upon the professional experience and lived experience of Regional Experts who have authored the study. The estimates of modern slavery presented in the study are derived from various secondary research sources, including UN agencies, academic research, CSO submissions to UN human rights mechanisms, country reports submitted to UN mechanisms, and news reports.

## About the Report

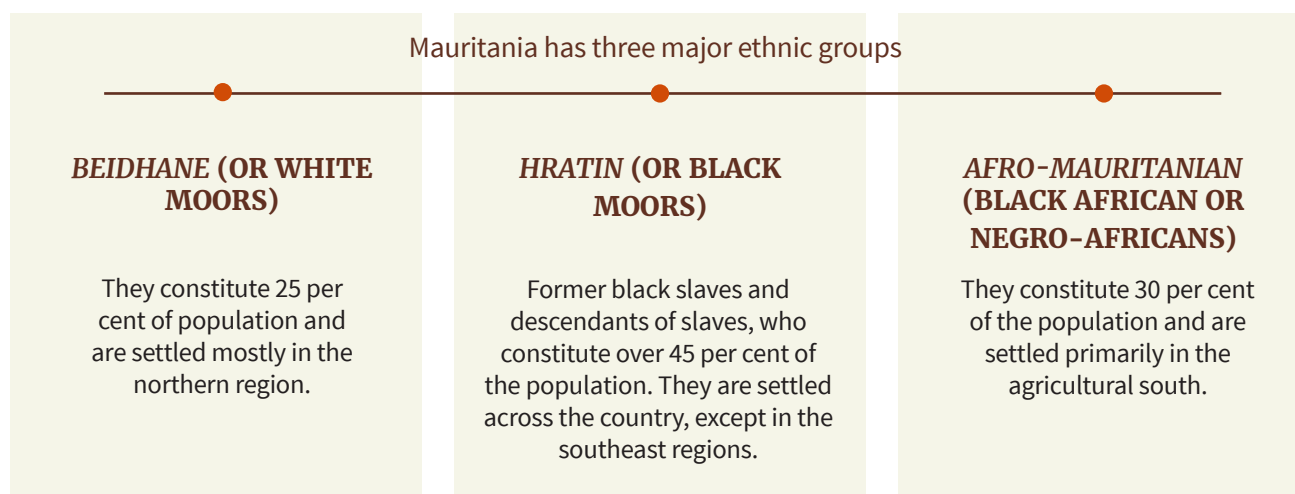
The study provides a profile of the ethnic communities of Mauritania and the CDWD groups within them. It offers a country profile and human development indicators. The study further contextualises the role of caste and descent among the ethnic groups in determining their occupation. It explores the socio-economic status of the CDWD and the nature of discrimination they experience due to their caste identity. The study also discusses the prevalence, nature, and scale of modern slavery among the CDWD of Mauritania and examines the national and international response to addressing it. Specific recommendations are provided to various parties, including the state, UN bodies, and industry.



## Chapter 2

# Communities Discriminated On Work And Descent In Mauritania

## THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF MAURITANIA AND CASTE-STRUCTURE WITHIN



**T**he Beidhane and Afro-Mauritanians are a highly stratified society with distinct caste and class structures. The Hratin, the descendants of formerly enslaved black African people, traditionally served the Beidhane. Today, they comprise the majority of the population and are the most visible ethnic groups who are victims of descent-based slavery.

It may be noted that in many academic and government records, the Hratin are considered part of the Beidhane, albeit the so-called “lower-caste” among them. There are two reasons for this - first, traditionally, they served the Beidhane as their domestic slaves, and were “owned” by them – from generation to generation and over time have undergone acculturation. They constituted the bottom-most rung of Beidhane social hierarchy. This ‘designation’ persists in many mindsets and records.

Secondly, the long association of Hratin with Beidhane led to an assimilation of language and culture. As such, most of the Hratin speak Hassaniya - a dialect derived from the language of the Arab-Berbers or White Moors. Since Mauritania’s population is recorded based on linguistic groups rather than ethnicity - the Hratin and Beidhane are clubbed together as those who speak Hassaniya Arabic. In the government records of the 1960s, Hassaniya Arabic speakers were recorded as 80 per cent of the population.

Many government statements encompassed both Beidhane and Hratin in use of term "Maure". In contemporary Mauritania, however, the term ‘Maure’ primarily refers to the Beidhane - as Maures blancs, i.e. ‘white Maures’. *The Hratin view themselves as a distinct identity from the Beidhane. The report is also attempts to assert the Hratin identity as distinct from the Beidhane identity.*

**Beidhane or “White Moors” - literally "the Whites" in Arabic, or the Maures (meaning “Arabic speaking”)**

A deeper look at each of the ethnic groups is as follows (also refer Table 1) :

The *Beidhane* are estimated to be over 1 million in numbers, constituting 25 per cent of the country’s population. They hold Arab ancestry from successive waves of Arab settlers who intermixed to varying degrees with existing Berber and Black people. They speak Hassanya, an Arabic dialect also found in Western Sahara, southern Morocco, southern Algeria, northern Mali and in the north of Senegal.

Historically, the *Beidhane* society exhibits highly stratified caste-class structures, comprising nobles as so called “high-born” followed by the so-called “lower-caste” comprising artisans, servants and slaves.

The *Beidhane* nobles trace their lineage to “Arabs” or “warriors” (also known Hassan), the “*tolba*” (marabouts, per French, or *zawāyā* per Hassaniya language) – who were holy men and scholars. Some *Beidhane*/ Moorish tribes claim to be *Chourafa* or descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Any challenge to this claim is met with outrage and reprisals.

The occupational or artisan caste included the *M'almine* (blacksmiths) and other crafts people, and the *Iguawen* (Griots - troubadour - praise singers). They were assigned occupations in service of the nobles, and their descendants continue to be stigmatised and discriminated based on the ancestral assigned occupation.

The *Igawen* (griots) traditionally were a particular caste of poets, musicians and singers in Hassani Arabic. Their main job was to maintain and recite the oral history of each Moorish tribe through music and poetry. The role was handed down the generations from father to son through ancestry.

The oral history called “*T'heydinn*” was performed at social events accompanied by music. The unique skill and role of *Igawen* gave them a vital position in the *Beidhane* society with whom they are culturally affiliated and shared the same skin colour and physical features.

Traditionally, the *Hratin* were at the bottom-most hierarchical social order. In contemporary Mauritania, many *Hratin* identify themselves as distinct from the *Beidhane*, hence their classification as a separate ethnic group.

Both the occupational caste / artisans and *Hratin* comprise the “Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) of Mauritania, with the distinction that the *Hratin* experienced more discrimination comparatively.

**In contemporary Mauritania, many Hratin identify themselves as distinct from the Beidhane, hence their classification as a separate ethnic group.**

## Hratin or “Black Moors”

The **Hratin** are estimated to be nearly 1.9 million, constituting over 45 per cent of the total population according to community experts. They are of Black African or Negro-African origin and comprise the formerly enslaved black African people and descendants of formerly enslaved black African people.

The **Hratin** share skin colour with black Africans (i.e. Afro Mauritians). They exhibit Moorish culture and speak the Hassanya language (Arabic dialect) – the language of their former slavers or former masters. This assimilation results from their acculturation through centuries-old slavery and the hidden slavery in contemporary Mauritania<sup>4</sup>.

Historically, the **Hratin** have inherited their slave status and family occupation, symbolising the prevalence of descent-based slavery in Mauritania. They have been endogamous and are socially segregated.

The **Hratin** form a majority in Mauritania and can also be found in other countries, including – Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Mali, Senegal, Tunisia and Libya. In the latter two countries, they are referred as **Shwasshin** and **Chouachin**.

## Black Africans or Negro-Africans or Afro Mauritians

Black Africans or Negro-Africans or Afro Mauritians primarily comprise the Black sub-Saharan from other ethnic groups. They are estimated to be 1.3 million, constituting 30 per cent of the population. These include - **Soninké** or **Sarakolé**, **Pulaar** or **Fulbe**, the **Wolof**, and the **Bambara** also found in West Africa. Like **Beidhane**, the Black Africans are a highly stratified society, where nobles, artisans and enslaved people form a hierarchical social structure. Details about each ethnic groups comprising the Afro Mauritians are as follows: (also refer Table 1)

- **The Pulaars (Peulhs or Fulani)** can be found across the southern region. The **Pulaars** are one of the oldest ethnic groups in the country. The “high-born” nobles were followed by artisans and griots, including **Maabo** or weavers, **Wambaabe** or griots, **Waylube** or metalworkers, **Takebe** or shoemakers and **Laobés** or woodenware assembler. The **Maccudo** or slaves were at the bottom of the social class.

- The **Soninké** are located in the extreme south. They are the descendants of the Ghana Empire’s inhabitants, who once held dominion over the country until its fall. **Soninké** society is one of the most hierarchical in Mauritania and has retained its Ladanous system (traditional way of life) despite the economic progress of the discriminated community. At the top of the social hierarchy were the **Horos**, who formed a noble caste made up of **Debegoumous**, **Modinous** and **Mangous**. They could inter-marry and held all decision-making power within the ethnic group. They dominated over the lower castes, subdivided into the **Niakhamalas / Gnakhmalanous** (artisans) and the **Komos** (slave-caste).

The **Niakhamalas / Gnakhmalanous** comprised artisan caste, including the **Jaaro** (griots), blacksmiths, fisherfolk, weavers, jewellers and shoemakers, among others. The **Komo** or slaves, were at the bottom of the social ladder. Traditionally, a Komo was attached to a specific master and handed down as an inheritance to the next generation, as were the children. The persistent hierarchy is the main cause of discrimination and violence against members of the CDWD in Soninke society today.

### The Wolofs

■ The **Wolofs** predominantly inhabit the coastal southwestern regions of Mauritania, near the Senegal River. The caste hierarchy within **Wolofs** included **Guers** (nobles), followed by repressed caste groups - **Guewels** (griots), **Oudai** (leather workers), among others. The **Diam** or slave-caste are at the bottom-most of the hierarchy.

### The Bambara

■ The **Bambara** are present in the south and southeast of the country, mainly in the Guidimakha and Hodh Charghi regions. The caste hierarchy within **Bambara** included - **Horons** (nobles), followed by repressed caste groups, including - **Djeli** (griots) and **Noumou** (blacksmiths), among others. The repressed caste groups were together known as "**Niamatélas**", a term to identify the groups easily by calling them their family names.

**Inter-caste marriages between the CDWD and nobility continue to be unacceptable. This applies to all Black African ethnic groups and between Beidhane and Hratin.**

Table 1

| Ethnic groups                                       | CDWD sub-group   | Non CDWD sub-group   |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Beidhane</b> (or White Moors)                    | <b>Iguawen</b> or Griots (troubadour-praise singers)<br><b>M'almine</b> (blacksmiths)<br><b>Hratin</b> (slave-caste, who now identify separately)  | Nobles - Arabs" or "warriors" (or <b>Hassan</b> ) and the "murābiṭ" (marabouts, or <b>zawāyā</b> ) who were holy men and scholars. |
| <b>Hratin</b> (or Black Moors)                      | 100 per cent <b>Hratin</b>   |  |
| <b>Black Africans or Afro Mauritians</b>            |  |  |
| <b>Pulaars</b> (or <b>Peulhs</b> or <b>Fulani</b> ) | <b>Maabo</b> (weavers), <b>Wambaabe</b> (griots), <b>Waylube</b> (metalworkers), <b>Sakebe</b> (shoemakers) and <b>Laobés</b> (cattle herders).<br><b>Maccudo</b> or slaves were / are the bottom of the social class. | Nobles known as <b>Toroobe</b> (plural; <b>Toroodo</b> (singular).   |
| <b>Soninké</b>                                      | <b>Niakhamalas/ Gnakhmalanous</b> (artisans) including - <b>Jaaro</b> (griots), blacksmiths, shoemakers etc.<br>The <b>Komo</b> or slaves are at the bottom of the social ladder                                       | Nobles known as " <b>Camara</b> " or " <b>Horo</b> " (Debegoumous, Modinous and Mangous.   |
| <b>Wolofs</b>                                       | Artisanry- <b>Guewels</b> (singers), <b>Laobé</b> (leather workers), <b>Maabo</b> (weavers), <b>Tegg</b> (blacksmiths).<br>The <b>Diam</b> or slave-caste are at the bottom  | Nobles known as <b>Guer</b> .  |
| <b>Bambara</b>                                      | <b>Niamatélas</b> including <b>Djeli</b> (griots), <b>Noumou</b> (blacksmiths)   | Nobles known as <b>Horon</b>   |

## DEMOGRAPHY OF THE COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

The government of Mauritania only captures population by ethnicity therefore there are no official records of the population numbers of the CDWD communities. According to the local rights experts, the total CDWD population is estimated to be 2,838,032 persons, or 65 per cent of the total population. The female CDWD population is estimated at 1,100,480 persons (38.77% of CDWD population), male CDWD at 973,520 persons (34.30%) and child CDWD at 764,032 children (26.93%)<sup>5</sup>.

The CDWD population of 2,838,032 persons comprises 1.9 million *Hratin* (45% of country's population), and rest 0.9 million comprising the (a) occupational/ artisan caste among *Beidhane*, (b) occupational/ artisan caste among Afro Mauritians and (c) formerly enslaved-caste and descendants of Afro Mauritians.

In 2022, the working population of CDWD is estimated by the World Bank at 1,052,229 persons, of which females comprise 467,229 persons (45% of total population) and males comprise 585,000 persons (55%)<sup>6</sup>.

## THE CDWD DIASPORA

More than 500,000 Mauritians live abroad, with over 9,000 of them being students, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and Mauritians Abroad in 2020.

According to local rights groups, most of the initial Mauritanian diaspora were refugees fleeing persecution, slavery, state racism and forced expulsion. The conflict between Senegal and Mauritania in the 1980s forced them to flee the country. Discrimination and persistent descent-based slavery of *Hratin* (Black Moors) and the *Iguawoun* (Griots), *M'almine* (blacksmiths) and *Znagueu* (tributaries) are factors known to have led to the exodus of these groups.

It has to be noted that there is inadequate data on the Mauritanian diaspora estimates. Most data is managed by international organisations such as the OECD and UN bodies.

Over 8,000 foreign-born Mauritians reside in the United States, according to American Migration (2023), with most of them in Ohio, followed by Brooklyn, New York, Memphis and Tennessee. The majority of them are *Hratin*, *Iguawoun*, *M'almine* and *Znagueu*, working mostly as taxi drivers, vendors in smoke shops, food delivery, truck drivers and construction workers.

The Mauritanian community in Europe is the second largest Mauritanian community abroad after that in Africa, with most living in France, Belgium, Spain and Germany. Statistics published by Eurostat show that the number of Mauritians living in France varies between 15,000 and 19,000 citizens and residents, - 6,085 of whom are asylum seekers (2017).

West Africa has the highest number (51.2%) of Mauritanian migrants (IOM). The 1989 Senegal/Mauritania conflict saw over 33,955 *Pulaar* migrants flee to other West African countries, mainly to Senegal<sup>7</sup>.

There are over 30,000 Mauritians in Arab countries, particularly in the Gulf, i.e. 9 per cent of all Mauritanian migrants worldwide. This information is approximate and derived from IOM data, Mauritanian Foreign Affairs and the European Union. According to local rights experts, Mauritanian emigrants in the Gulf States are Arabic-speaking (Moors and *Hratin*), with most being *Hratin*.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The government of Mauritania needs to record population by ethnicity, resulting in a lack of government records regarding human development indicators for the CDWD in the country.

The overall adult literacy rate is 68 per cent of the total population, with female literacy at 33.33 per cent and male literacy at 66.67 per cent. Among the CDWD, it is estimated by local rights experts that 33.33 per cent of total CDWD males are literate, while only 10 per cent of CDWD women are literate.

Over 43.5 per cent of the total working population is employed, with 31.7 per cent being women and 68.3 per cent being men. The unemployment rate is estimated to be 11.10 per cent<sup>8</sup>, with the 15-24 age group experiencing higher unemployment ranging from 31 per cent to 47 per cent, particularly in urban areas. Among this age group, over 69 per cent of girls and 50.8 per cent of boys are unemployed.

Unemployment among the CDWD population in the 15-24 age group is significantly higher in urban areas, with over 74 per cent of girls and 62 per cent of boys in the young population being unemployed. The high unemployment is attributed to factors such as lack of qualifications and vocational training, limited job opportunities, and challenges in obtaining funds for entrepreneurship<sup>9</sup>.

The under-five mortality rate is 40.5 deaths per 1000 live births (UNICEF). Maternal mortality in Mauritania is among the highest in Africa, with 766 deaths for every 100,000 live births. A considerable number of high-risk pregnancies, low-quality prenatal health care, poor access to emergency assistance and cultural and socio-economic factors are among the reasons for the high maternal mortality<sup>10</sup>. For example national life expectancy is 68.4 years, 68.7 years for women and 67.1 years for men.

As there are no specific statistics for CDWD, it can only be assumed that the infant and maternal mortality rate and life expectancy will be similar to general estimates, if not lower, due to poor health coverage and the inaccessibility of health facilities in rural areas and in the *adwaba*<sup>11</sup>.

The CDWD in contemporary Mauritania are engaged in a variety of labour-related occupations at daily wage, including dockers in the ports and markets of urban centres, carters transporting goods and barrels of water in rural areas and on the outskirts of towns, labourers on building sites, agricultural areas, mining companies, fish processing plants, and gold mines in small-scale mines such as Tevragh zeina (Tasiast) and Gleib Ndour. They also work as domestic workers, guards in public and private buildings, herders in sylvo-pastoral areas, sanitation workers including septic tank cleaners and emptiers, urban cleaners, taxi drivers, vendors (such as couscous sellers), and subordinates in defence and security forces.

The urbanisation rate for CDWDs is estimated at 40 per cent, in line with the national urbanisation rate of 50 per cent, according to ANSADE. However, CDWDs are generally concentrated on the outskirts of towns, in Gazras (undeveloped areas), and shanty town slums. Furthermore, 30 per cent of the CDWD community is lacking access to running water due to discrimination in rural areas, particularly in Adwaba and peri-urban areas.

CDWD households have limited access to electricity, with an average of approximately 35 per cent of households having access. Similarly, the sanitation system, overall, is inadequate and needs significant improvement, even in major towns like Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. This situation leads to significant challenges in effectively draining rainwater during the winter season and causes illnesses.

**As there are no specific statistics for CDWD, it can only be assumed that the infant and maternal mortality rate and life expectancy will be similar to general estimates, if not lower, due to poor health coverage and the inaccessibility of health facilities in rural areas and in the *Adwaba*.**

## Chapter 3

# DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION OF THE COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

### Discrimination against the occupational/artisan caste among the Beidhane (White Moors):

The CDWD comprising the so-called "lower caste" and "slave caste" within each of the ethnic groups of Mauritania, continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in varying degrees. Discrimination faced by Hratins is generally at the hands of the socially, economically and politically dominant white Moorish groups, traditionally the "masters" or "slavers" of the Hratin CDWD.

The dominant *Beidhane* or Arab-Berbers/ White Moors occupy white-collar public and private jobs. At the same time, the darker-skinned Hratin and Afro-Mauritanian CDWDs are under-represented in leadership positions and face many obstacles in society, from access to education to well-paid jobs.

The *M'almines* (blacksmith), *Igawen* (griots) and *Znaagueu* (cattle herders) among the *Beidhane* (White Moors) ethnic group have been culturally marginalised and suppressed. Their small population hinders solidarity efforts, and ongoing neglect has nearly made them invisible.

Although they are very similar culturally and physically, the *Igawen* and *M'almine* are discriminated against by the *Beidhane* because of their ancestry and work as artists, which they have inherited from father to son. One prominent incident of discrimination and humiliation suffered by the *Iguiw* (masculine, singular) in Mauritania is of the late Sidaty ould Abba, a great poet and composer.

*Late Sidaty ould Abba was the griot composer of the first national anthem of Mauritania and was hailed as the "true imam of art".*

*Upon his death on 26 September 2019, the Grand Imam and Mufti of the Great Mosque of Nouakchott, Mohamed ould Habibou Rahmane, refused to lead the funeral prayer over the remains of Sidaty ould Abba, calling him impure owing to his ancestry.*

Another prominent case of discrimination and humiliation of the Igawen is of the popular young artist Seddoum Ahmed. The case also showcases the social restrictions on inter-caste marriages between the so-called "lower castes" with the "high-born" Moors.

*Seddoum Ahmed, who shares a rich ancestry with famous musicians and poets, was arrested when he secretly married a divorced Moorish woman named Mama Mint El Moustava, from the lineage of the Chourafa (descendants of the Prophet Mohamed).*

*Mama's Chourafa Moorish family, who consider themselves superior to even the other Moorish noble-caste, lodged a complaint against Ahmed, who was arrested on the grounds that marriage between an Iguiv and a Chriviyeu (feminine singular of Chriv) was unnatural, as well as without the consent of Mama's father. Eventually, the case was withdrawn at the intervention of scholar and great Mufti Mohamed El Hacem Ould Deddew, who issued a Fatwa (a legal response). The Fatwa stated that all men are born free and equal and that there is no superiority by descent. Their marriage was then approved by the Mauritania judiciary and they are currently married and living a normal life.*

Some **Beidhane** or Moorish groups claim their genealogy can be traced back to the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH), and any challenge to their claim to superiority is met with outrage and reprisals. The arrest of writer-genealogist El Hacem Souleymane Baidi, who is from **M'almine** (blacksmith) caste of the **Beidhane** ethnic group, is an example of the silencing of free speech, especially those against the dominant castes of Mauritania.

*El Hacem Souleymane Baidi is a M'alem genealogist (blacksmith) of Mauritanian origin and has lived in Saudi Arabia for several years. His research on Moorish genealogy challenges the claim of certain Moorish tribes as being Chourafa (descendants of the Prophet Mohamed). Upon a complaint by Ahmed Salem Ould Dah, on behalf of his tribe, the Oulad Ghailane – one such Moorish tribe which claims the Chourafa lineage, Baidi was arrested, tried and imprisoned for four years.*

*Not only is the arrest and imprisonment an infringement of the right to freedom of expression, but it is also a travesty of justice since the case of intellectual production should have been fought or contradicted on intellectual grounds. Another irony of the case is that the complainant was a journalist and the former president of the journalists' union, purportedly the defender of freedom of expression.*



## Discrimination against the *Hratin*:

The *Hratin*, on the other hand, face a high degree of discrimination and exclusion in Mauritania. They are engaged in jobs that Arab-Berbers consider dirty or degrading. Particular occupations are designated for their caste, such as butchery, rubbish collection, and cleaners, among others. They have little access to basic social infrastructure facilities, as was found by IRA – an anti-slavery organisation, in forty-two of *Hratin* Adwaba which are villages inhabited by the *Hratin*.

Forty-two of the densely populated *Hratin* Adwaba in Oum Vnaदेश, Magta Lahjar department lack essential social infrastructure such as water sources, schools, health centres, Quranic schools, mosques, and field protection. In contrast, the *Vrigue*, inhabited by former masters or their descendants, have access to these facilities, exacerbating discrimination against the *Hratin*.

As told by Sidi Elimine, a Hartani from Oum Vnaदेश Edebay (masculine singular of Adwaba ), to an anti-slavery organisation IRA, the *Hratin* primarily engage in farming but are excluded from government programs like "Taazour" that provide field protection from domestic animals owned by influential Moorish individuals. Despite their fields being grazed, fear of reprisals prevents them from reporting incidents to authorities, including solitary confinement or loss of aid from NGOs. These circumstances severely hinder the *Hratin*'s ability to assert their rights and perpetuate their marginalised position.

## Discrimination against the CDWD among the *Pulaar*:

The discrimination faced by *Maabo*, *Laobés*, *Wambaabe*, *Waylube*, *Sakebe* and *Maccudo* among the *Pulaar* ethnic group, becomes evident during traditional ceremonies, inter-caste marriage attempts and electoral contests caste affiliation is clearly defined. The *Pulaar* were the victims of attempted genocide and crimes against humanity (torture, murder, mass executions and deportation to Senegal and Mali) in an conflict between Senegal and Mauritania in 1989. Some 33,955 members of the Mauritanian *Pulaar* community fled Mauritania, mainly to Senegal and Mali.<sup>16</sup>



## Discrimination against the CDWD among the Soninké:

Soninké society is highly hierarchical in the Guidimakha region, where the Horos - the noble caste (Debegoumous and Modinous), dominate the socio-cultural life of the entire ethnic group. The so-called lower castes among the Soninké, comprising the **Jaaro**, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and **Komo** (slave-caste) are excluded from any decision-making process within the community, irrespective of advancements made by the CDWD community. This hierarchy is the main cause of discrimination and violence against members of the CDWD in Soninke society.

*Samba Moussa Kone, an activist from the Gambanaxu (or Gambana) movement – which is an anti-slavery movement initiated by the Komo (formerly enslaved-caste group) of the Soninké community; was brutally attacked by Soninké slave masters known as the Camara or Horo in Daffort on 31 July 2021. Kone suffered violent assault and torture in his field for refusing to accept his enslavement. Despite the abolition of the land tenure system, the Soninké noble caste, represented by the Camara or Horo, maintains control over land ownership.*

*The local territorial administration, including the gendarmerie, district chief, prefect, governor, and politicians, supports the customary chiefs in upholding this power dynamic. The attack sends a clear message to Kone and other Komos that resisting enslavement will result in the seizure of their agricultural land, crucial for their survival, and any objections are met with further brutality.*

*Kone, who had cultivated his ancestral land for years, is stripped of his property rights due to the deeply rooted system of slavery by descent. Many individuals, like Kone, remain trapped in this servile existence in Guidimakha.*

The situation has reached a boiling point due to arbitrary court rulings against the Komo people. These rulings lack factual basis and serve as a means to settle scores with rebellious enslaved people, with the justice system complicit in supporting the local feudal system. Land that generations of descendants of enslaved people have cultivated is unjustly expropriated and returned to the slave masters, exacerbating discrimination and violence against the Komo community.

Samba Moussa Kone, who suffered severe injuries, is a victim of this ongoing cycle. Even when descendants of enslaved people follow the law and submit land allocation requests, local chiefs, prefects, and the courts often deny them simply because they do not come from the same masters. This violence against Kone results from a land dispute brought before the departmental and regional courts, and the case is now awaiting a final ruling from the Supreme Court.

## Discrimination against the CDWD among the Wolofs:

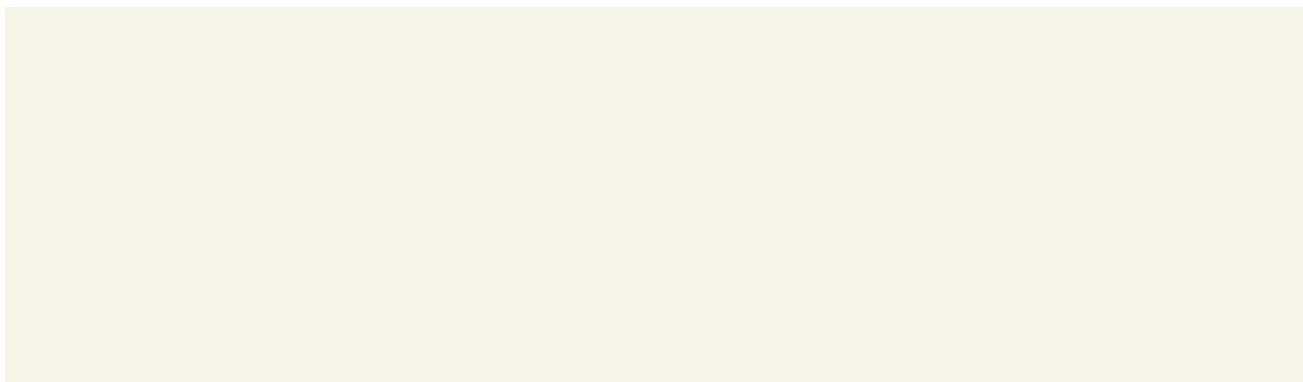
Discrimination is less apparent within the Wolof community in Mauritania due to its openness, mixing, and relatively high education levels, which mitigate the impact of discrimination.

However, in specific Wolof villages like Garack, situated east of Rosso, discrimination against the *Diam* caste (slave caste) is distinctly evident through housing segregation, separate cemeteries and religious ceremonies where each group organises its own feast.

## In general, discrimination against the CDWD of Mauritania across ethnic groups is manifested in varying degrees in the following manner:

- **Political:** Owing to their large population and illiteracy levels, the CDWD are used as vote banks. Political ambition among the CDWD is known to be faced with hindrances.
- **Housing and Living:** In general, the CDWD live in appalling conditions in segregated shanty towns, locally known as "kebbas" or Gazras, and also in city outskirts, with low or no sanitation facilities, potable water and electricity. The Hratin in urban areas are confined to ghettos, while Black Africans are segregated in neighbourhoods inhabited mainly by them and in certain towns in the Senegal River valley.
- **Jobs:** The CDWD in Mauritania are engaged in menial jobs that barely allow them to live in dignity. Traditionally, the CDWD did not have the right to own land, and as such most are landless in contemporary Mauritania. The CDWD, work as farm labourers, while the harvest goes to the Arab masters or nobles. The Black Africans are dispossessed of their land, which is rented out or sold to multinationals or investors from the Gulf or to local investors from the dominant segment. The case of the land in the village of Ngawle (Tekane department, Trarza region) is a good example of this.
- **Religious Segregation:** Some CDWDs experience abusive segregation, in particular the expelled populations of the Guidimagha region in south-east Mauritania, where enslaved people or descendants of enslaved people do not have the right to pray in the same mosques as the nobles nor to lead prayers, nor to be buried in the same cemeteries.
- **Social restrictions in inter-caste marriages:** Inter-caste marriages between CDWDs and noble families are unacceptable. Those who challenge the social order face reprisals ranging from imprisonment under false charges to physical elimination. Inter-caste marriages between CDWD of different ethnic groups is not a problem.
- **Violence against CDWD Women and children:** The women and children, especially those engaged in domestic work, are known to be subjected to rape and sexual violence by their so-called masters or their family members. Such cases are rarely reported.

# MODERN SLAVERY OF COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT IN MAURITANIA



**T**he most recent Global Slavery Index conducted by Walkfree, ILO and IOM in 2023 ranks Mauritania as the 3rd country in the world with the highest prevalence of modern slavery globally. Over 149,000 people are victims of modern slavery, with 32 out of every 1000 people living in slavery or slavery-like practices<sup>17</sup>.

Modern slavery is a worldwide phenomenon and over 50 million people worldwide live in modern slavery and slavery-like practices, according to the global report. Modern Slavery is commonly categorised as – (I) Forced labour, including descent-based servitude, bonded labour, child exploitation, sexual slavery and trafficking of persons, among others and (II) Forced Marriage.

Modern slavery in Mauritania does not necessarily refer to people in chains but manifests in various ways. Deeply rooted in the history and sociology of the country, traditional descent-based slavery persists despite legal measures and specialised institutions dedicated to combating slavery.

The people directly affected by modern slavery and slavery-like practices belong to the CDWD population within the ethnic groups of the country. Local rights organisations working on anti-slavery estimate that over 725 760 people constituting 18 per cent of the population continue to live in slavery and slavery-like practices.

Despite the inadequate research and government data on modern slavery and slavery-like practices, the existence of the practice in Mauritania cannot be ignored.

## Descent-based slavery of the CDWD of Mauritania

Existing slavery among the formerly enslaved castes of Mauritania serves as a glaring example of gross human rights abuse that has endured for hundreds of years. The social hierarchies, exploitation, and discrimination prevalent among the CDWD (Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent) in Mauritania find their roots in descent-based slavery and the historical slave trade involving groups such as the **Hratin**, **Komo** (from the Soninké ethnic group), **Maccudo** (from the Pulaar ethnic group), and **Diam** (from the Wolof ethnic group).

Among the CDWD communities, the **Hratin** suffer a more significant impact than others, despite being a majority community within the country. Most cases of descent-based slavery in present-day Mauritania involve individuals from the **Hratin** community born into slavery or descendant of slaves.

This deeply entrenched system of distinction forms the essence of slavery in Mauritania, where individuals are assigned to a “slave caste” at birth. They are then compelled to serve their masters throughout their lives without receiving fair payment for their labour and without any form of social protection. They are subject to the will of their masters, facing threats and abuse if they fail to comply. These deeply ingrained discriminatory attitudes not only perpetuate the existence of slavery in Mauritania but also contribute to the marginalisation and social exclusion of those affected.

Mauritania’s stratified society means that individuals formerly enslaved or descendants of enslaved people continue to bear the stigma of their “slave-class” status, enduring social ostracisation by society at large.

According to a formerly enslaved person, Haby Mint Rabah, “People are free to move around, but it is in some way due to a lack of education and income, and the persistence of certain slavery codes in certain religious rites, that slaves are chained to this life.” With nowhere else to go, Haby Mint Rabah’s only duty was to serve her white master. She tried to flee a few times but always returned to serve her masters. According to eyewitness accounts, this practice is so deeply rooted in Mauritanian society that it becomes difficult to start a new life.

*A prominent case of descent-based slavery of **Hartania** (feminine, singular) - **Mariem Mint Cheibany** and her two minor daughters came to light in November 2021 thanks to the work of IRA Mauritanie.*

*Thirty-nine-year-old Marième was a domestic servant by descent / hereditary with the family of Cheikhna Chehlawi in Aïn Varba, Hodh Gharbi region, department of Tintane.*

*On one occasion, when Marième’s husband, Mohamed Lemine requested her so-called “master” for his wife’s identity card for her treatment, Chehlawi refused to hand over the i-card and restricted her movement.*

**With no access to education, housing, income, arable land, or decent employment opportunities, the Hratin and other CDWD individuals are trapped in modern slavery. To survive, they are compelled to remain under the control of their masters due to their tribal or community affiliation. As a result, they endure a life of domestic servitude, often passed down by descent to their children. They continue to work without employment contracts, healthcare coverage, or social security and face various forms of discrimination, corruption, and abuse.**

*Earlier, one of the Marième's daughters was also "gifted" as a wedding present to Cheikhna Chehlawi's sister. Marième's husband, Lemine, brought up the matter with the Hakem (Prefect) and the mayor of Tintane, who hold judicial powers to follow up on complaints of slavery practices. However, the officials turned him away, and he approached the anti-slavery organisation IRA<sup>18</sup>.*

*A fact-finding mission by IRA on 8 November 2021 ascertained the domestic servitude of Marième and her daughters, and a complaint of their slavery at the Chehlawi household was lodged with the gendarmerie brigade under Law 2015-031.*

*IRA feared that the case might be whitewashed, recalling similar events in 2011 when its activists were arrested, tortured and imprisoned following the denunciation of a case of slavery in the same locality of Ain Varba.*

*The matter was heard in Aioun court. Human rights observers have noted gaps in investigation and prosecution. Some of the accused Chehlawi's alleged enslaved people, including the plaintiff's sisters, aunts and nieces, were known to be mobilised to defend their masters in court. Intensive advocacy by IRA across the country and abroad has supported the victim and her children.*

*Mauritania's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) conducted its fact-finding mission in November 2021. It concluded "strong presumptions of cases of slavery in accordance with the terms of the 2015 law". The CNDH encouraged the judicial authorities to continue their investigations to confirm or refute the slavery allegations.*

*Following the hearing, the Indictment Division imprisoned the two main accused - Cheikhna Chehlawi and his daughter Salma Chehlawi. Finally, Cheikhna Chehlawi's slavery case was heard by the Nouakchott South Slavery Court and Cheikhna Chehlawi was sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment on 13 December 2023.*

*The freed slaves Mariem Mint Cheibani, and her three daughters, along with her husband, were forced to take refuge in Nouakchott with the help of the IRA movement, following exactions, reprisals and their expulsion from the locality of Ain Varba and Tintane.*

## Exploitative Labour:

// **Tâcheronat** engages menial labourers for services such as drivers, watchmen and labourers in private sector companies through intermediaries. The term **Tâcheron** negatively describes the intermediary's role as a "jobber" who recruits menial labourers. The practice is exploitative since it does not give any job guarantee or employment contract, and the labourers are known to work in sub-standard working conditions.

The **Metayage** system is a traditional form of sharecropping in cultivation which has been abolished by law through the prohibition of the traditional land tenure act. The system essentially engaged the **Hratin** and other black-African formerly slave-caste people as farm labourers over generations in exchange for a share of the harvest.

In practice, the **Hratin**/ other CDWD were remunerated a pittance, while the majority share crop went to the noble-caste people as customary custodians of land. The system is highly exploitative since the Hratin/other CDWD had/ have no claim to land ownership, despite working on the same land over generations. The **Metayage** system recognised the noble-caste groups as a tribal chiefdom, giving them the right to levy on the land cultivated by the enslaved or formerly enslaved person.

Despite its abolition, the system persists in rural areas dominated by the noble-caste groups as customary chiefdoms. Even when descendants of enslaved people follow the law and submit land allocation requests, they are often denied by local authorities, prefects, and the courts simply because they do not come from the same masters. The affected CDWD who resist and try to claim land ownership are often known to be met with violence and reprisals, as seen in the case of Samba Moussa Kone, a **Komo** (case mentioned in the earlier chapter).

## Child Labour:

Child labour exists in various parts of Mauritania. Children of families affected by descent-based slavery are known to accompany their parents in a life of early- unpaid servitude.

The poor families, too, rely on the children for additional income. Children are known to be engaged in domestic servitude and forced labour in various sectors such as gold mining, auto maintenance, fisheries and local shops, among others. They do not receive any protection or assistance in times of accidents. The talibés (boy pupils) in Quranic schools are known to be forced into begging by some corrupt madrasas (Quranic schools).

Children of Hratin and Black-African (Afro-Mauritanian) descent, as well as children with disabilities, are found to be particularly vulnerable in child labour<sup>19</sup>. Children born to women who are held in slavery are regarded as belonging to masters and face additional hurdles when seeking civil registration if born out of wedlock. This hampers their access to education and benefits from developmental policies, further entrapping them in the vicious cycle of child labour.

### Sexual Slavery:

For women and girls held in slavery, instances of sexual abuse and violence, including rape, remain a serious risk. Enslaved women are sometimes raped to be punished, to satisfy the master's libido or to serve as surrogate mothers. This highlights the intersecting forms of discrimination, compounded with physical and sexual violence, which enslaved women face.

### Trafficking of Persons:

Human traffickers exploit victims within Mauritania. They specifically target Mauritanian women and girls, especially Hratin and Afro-Mauritanian communities, by luring them with false promises of shelter, education and employment. They are known to be forced into domestic servitude in major cities such as Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Rosso.

Refugees in Nouadhibou are compelled to engage in commercial sex due to their desperate financial circumstances, rendering them more susceptible to sex trafficking. Mauritanian, Nigerian, and Senegalese traffickers in the port city of Nouadhibou exploit Sub-Saharan African migrants passing through Mauritania on their journey to Morocco and Europe, subjecting them to forced labor and sex trafficking.

Both foreign agencies and Mauritanian intermediaries deceitfully recruit Mauritanian women for nursing and teaching positions abroad, only to exploit them in domestic servitude and sex trafficking in the Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia. Men from Middle Eastern and North African countries exploit Mauritanian girls and young women through legally contracted temporary marriages, using these arrangements as a means of sexual exploitation.

Specifically, Mauritanian women and girls from impoverished families enter into these forced marriages with the promise of significant payment, facilitated by brokers and travel agencies in Mauritania and the Middle East. They are subsequently exploited as sex slaves in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, contributing to the issue of sex trafficking<sup>20</sup>.

**In the port city of Nouadhibou, Mauritanian, Nigerian, and Senegalese traffickers exploit Sub-Saharan African migrants who pass through Mauritania on their way to Morocco and Europe, subjecting them to forced labour and sex trafficking.**



## Chapter 5

# NATIONAL RESPONSE MECHANISMS TO COMBAT MODERN SLAVERY

**T**he Constitution of Mauritania provides that all citizens are equal in their rights and duties, without distinction as to origin, employment or sex, and declares in its preamble that all citizens are equally free and equal.

In accordance with the constitutional safeguard, Mauritania abolished slavery in 1981, albeit the world's last country to do so. Slavery was first criminalised in 2007 (Law No. 2007-048), though the enforcement of the 2007 anti-slavery law was ineffective and was replaced by a new law in 2015.

The 2015 anti-slavery law (law n°031-2015) explicitly acknowledges slavery as a crime against humanity and introduces stricter penalties. While the enactment and clear definition raised hopes for progress in addressing the issue, the government, unfortunately, has shown reluctance in acknowledging the existence of slavery within the country, let alone taking substantial measures to combat it. Instead, the government has adopted a hostile attitude towards anti-slavery activists, suppressing any attempts to mobilise the Hratin community and the Komo community (Soniké), who are particularly affected by slavery.

Despite having this constitutional and legislative framework in place, the harsh reality remains that thousands of individuals are still subjected to traditional descent-based slavery in modern Mauritania. Those who escaped slavery are still considered part of the 'slave caste' and ostracised. This deeply entrenched form of slavery has evolved and manifests in various contemporary forms of enslavement. Thus, despite the existence of legal measures, the persistence of slavery in Mauritania highlights the ongoing challenges and complexities associated with eradicating this deeply rooted practice.

**Despite having this constitutional and legislative framework in place, the harsh reality remains that thousands of individuals are still subjected to traditional descent-based slavery in modern Mauritania.**

## Special Legislation To Combat Slavery

■ **Ordinance No. 81-234 of 9 November 1981** abolishes slavery in Mauritania. It provides for a 'slave' to lodge a complaint with the authorities against his master. This abolition decree was not accompanied by any measures to support and integrate the newly freed slaves, even in the provision of article 2, which provided for damages to slavers and not to the victims of slavery.

■ **Act No. 2007-048 of 3 September 2007** in Article 1, emphasises the freedom of a person from birth to death and provides for defining, criminalising and slavery practices. It defines slavery as "the exercise of the powers of ownership or some of them over one or more persons". It recognises the victims as any person - male or female, minor or adult (Art 2) and prohibits discrimination against a person claiming to be a slave (Art 3). It provides for imprisonment for five and ten years and a fine of 500,000 UM - 1,000,000 UM. The Act also penalises attempts to slavery (Art 4). The Act further penalises for subjecting the complainant-slave to violating physical integrity (Art 5), appropriating property or income (Art 6), depriving a slave-child in accessing education (Art 7), depriving inheritance (Art 8), marrying, arranging marriage, preventing marriage of woman-slave (Art 9) among other provisions.

Although this law was a significant step forward for human rights defenders and anti-slavery organisations at the time, it was rarely applied, according to local and international human rights defenders.

■ **Law 031-2015 of 10 September 2015** criminalises slavery and penalises slavery-like practices, repealing the contrary provisions of Law 2007-048. The 2015-31 Law acknowledges slavery as a crime against humanity, encompassing offences such as serfdom, debt bondage, and other similar practices, as defined by the Slavery Convention of 1926 and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery of 1956. Additionally, the law outlines various other offences, including the appropriation of property and income (Art 12), the deprivation of access to education (Art 13), fraudulent deprivation of inheritance (Art 14), and forced marriage (Art 15). Furthermore, it prohibits any form of discrimination against individuals who are enslaved (Art 2).

A progressive feature of this law is that it provides a legal basis for establishing specialised criminal courts for slavery and related practice (Art 20), and three (3) courts have been subsequently created in Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and Néma.

For punishment, the sanctions for slavery have been increased from 5 to 10 years in the Law No. 2007-48 to 10 to 20 years imprisonment under the 2015 Law. This sends a clear message to the nation that slavery is a serious offence. It also prescribes punishments of 5-7 years for servitude, debt bondage, appropriation of property/income of slaves, and 5-10 years for deprivation of access to education.

The 2015 Law enforces stricter punishments for slavery offences 5 to 10 years imprisonment under previous Law No. 2007-48 to 10 to 20 years. This is a statement to the nation on the seriousness of slavery as a criminal offence.

It further provides penalties of 5 to 7 years for servitude, debt bondage, and the appropriation of property or income belonging to enslaved individuals. Additionally, it stipulates a prison term of 5 to 10 years for offences related to depriving individuals of access to education.

The victims of slavery and slavery-like practices can claim damages through civil action (Art 25), and public interest, human rights and anti-slavery organisations can become a civil party (Art 22-23), a power that the CDHAHRSC shares. Victims are entitled to legal aid and are exempt from all expenses relating to bringing legal proceedings (Art 24). However, some human rights organisations believe that there is no political will to apply this whole legal arsenal effectively, and that it is designed to mislead international opinion and international donors.

■ **Law No. 2020-017 on preventing human trafficking**, suppressing related offences, and protecting victims was enacted in 2020, updating the previous 2003 law. Aligned with international standards like the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Forced Labour Convention, this law defines offences such as forced labour and organised crime. It also establishes conditions for aggravated penalties.

Notably, the law significantly enhances the protection of trafficking victims, including measures like a 6-month recovery period, free physical and psychological care, anonymity during investigations and proceedings, accommodation, social protection, and compensation. Significantly, this law extends its coverage to victims of slavery who have not been trafficked.

■ **Ordinance No. 0066-2022 of 7 January 2022** prohibits the employment of children in hazardous work detrimental to their physical or mental health in any public or private establishment, whether agricultural, commercial or industrial, including where such establishments impart religious or occupational education or are charitable institutions, family enterprises or private households. Section 42(1) in particular, provides for the protection of children under criminal law. The Ordinance provides a list of hazardous work prohibited for children.

## Other Relevant Legislation

■ **Ordinance 83-127 of 5 June 1983, Portant Reorganisation Fonciere Et Domaniale (Land and Property Reorganisation Ordinance)**

The Ordinance abolished traditional land tenure (including sharecropping). This ordinance established the land tenure system in Mauritania: land belongs to the nation, and any Mauritanian, without discrimination of any kind, can, by complying with the law, become part owner. The State recognises and guarantees private land ownership, which must, in accordance with the Shariah, contribute to the country's economic and social development.

Despite the existence of a legal arsenal, the long-established practice of "*Metayage*" - a type of rural lease in which an owner, the lessor, entrusts a tenant farmer with the task of cultivating land in exchange for a share of the harvest - is still very much alive in rural areas dominated by tribal and customary chiefdoms.

## Judicial Mechanism To Combat Modern Slavery

■ The national mechanism for the prevention of torture examines the situation and treatment of persons deprived of their liberty by regularly visiting places of detention and police custody.

■ The national appeal mechanism for child victims of violations of their rights is responsible for receiving complaints submitted directly by child victims of violations, by their legal representatives or by third parties, carrying out all investigations relating to the complaints received and examining, processing and ruling on them.

■ The national mechanism for protecting the rights of people with disabilities is responsible for receiving complaints submitted directly by people with disabilities whose rights have been violated by their representatives or third parties and for investigating, examining, processing and ruling on all complaints received.

## Specific Development Policies For The Combatting Persistent Slavery

■ **TAAZOUR** - The Délégation Générale à la Solidarité Nationale et à la Lutte Contre l'Exclusion (General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion)

The agency was established in 2021 by replacing TADAMOUN (National Agency for the Fight Against the Vestiges of Slavery, Inclusion, and the Fight Against Poverty). The process followed the national dialogue between the Mauritanian government, the opposition and Hratin leaders. TAAZOUR's role is to fight against slavery and its after-effects and the repatriation, integration and reintegration of Mauritanian deportees in Senegal and Mali following the events of 1989 between Mauritania and Senegal.

The plan of action focused on issues such as poverty reduction, income generation and better infrastructure. The agency has already implemented some measures relevant to victims of slavery and similar practices. For example, cash transfers to victims of child labour have been facilitated so that parents can send their children to school instead of forcing them to work.

Regrettably, the anti-slavery projects under TAAZOUR have had limited success in improving the economic and social conditions of the CDWD community due to poor management, misappropriation of funds, and challenges in accessing the funds, among other reasons, according to the local rights organisations.

■ **The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH)** has 26 members, as defined in legal order 015-2006 of 12 July 2006, who are women and men representing human rights movements in Mauritania. The CNDH is responsible for hearing all matters relating to the defence and protection of human rights and freedoms, guaranteeing their full exercise and promotion, and preserving citizens' dignity, rights and individual and collective freedoms, in strict compliance with national and international standards in this area.

## Gaps In Legislations And Provisions

### The broad areas of gaps in Legislation and provisions are:

Lack of government data on ethnicity hampers concerted special measures for their welfare and advancement.

Absence of strict documentation for birth, death and marriage registrations results in the CDWD's inability to access vital services.

Low reporting and poor investigation of cases result in to low cases, given the potentially high number of slavery cases. For cases that reach prosecution, prolonged delays in criminal proceedings hamper low convictions with the escape or disappearance of the accused.

The 2015 law of anti-slavery leaves much discretion on the part of the public and law enforcement authorities.

Undue influence of local communities and dominant ethnic groups over the formal justice system with pressure for settlement or withdrawal of cases, hampering reporting, investigation and prosecution of cases.

## National Organisations Working On Anti-Slavery

Some of the national organisations working on anti-slavery and for social justice and equity of the Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent include:

**SOS Esclaves**, works to eradicate slavery and support the reintegration of victims of slavery into society. It has always identified and denounced cases of traditional slavery in the HRATIN community. Over the last five years, SOS Esclaves has brought several cases of blatant slavery before the government's special courts to try slavers. One recent example concerns a trial in Néma, in the east of the country.

**Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA)** fights against slavery among all discriminated communities, particularly the Hratin in Mauritania. IRA has been instrumental in freeing many people from slavery and servitude. IRA, in association with UNPO, made a submission to the United Nations Committee against Torture (2018). The report documented cases of torture, torment, cruelty, inhuman or degrading treatment perpetrated against the Hratin community in Mauritania.

**Association of Women Heads of Household (AFCF)** defends human rights, particularly women's rights, focusing on combatting violence and sex trafficking of women and girls and the mistreatment of girls in domestic service and slavery. AFCF has supported 2,600 women's cooperatives reaching out to women domestic workers, shop assistants and street vendors from the CDWD of Mauritania.

**Forum of National Human Rights Organisations (FONADH)** - The Forum des Organisations Nationales des Droits Humains (FONADH) promotes human rights in Mauritania. Made up of 17 national associations, FONADH's mission is to promote and fight for human rights in Mauritania. FONADH focuses mainly on promoting the rights of the people of the Senegal River Valley, who were victims of racism, deportation during the events of 1989 and expropriation of land by the state from the people of the south of the country.

**Sahel Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Education** promotes human rights and the eradication of slavery and all kinds of discrimination based on work and descent in Mauritania. It provides schooling for CDWD children considering that slavery has a far-reaching and generational impact on the children who cannot access education.

## Chapter 6

# INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE MECHANISMS

**M**auritania is party to core international treaty bodies and their supplementary optional protocols that are relevant for eliminating modern slavery and slavery-like practices. The government has been working closely with the OHCHR, IOM, and ILO among other UN agencies. Mauritania has ratified all major Treaty Bodies<sup>21</sup> and ILO Conventions<sup>22</sup> pertinent to eliminate all forms of slavery and slavery-like practices. The Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (P029) is the most recent ratification.

### UN Treaty Bodies' Ratification

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1965 (CERD)  | ✓ |
| Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (CCPR)  | ✓ |
| Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESR) 1966  | ✓ |
| Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979 (CEDAW)                       | ✓ |
| Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 (CRC)  | ✓ |
| Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment                      | ✓ |
| International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families | ✓ |

### ILO Standards

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (C-29)   | ✓ |
| The Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (P029)                       | ✓ |
| Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (C-105)                                     | ✓ |
| Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 999 (C-182)                                     | ✓ |
| Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (C-138)  | ✓ |
| Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (C-087) | ✓ |
| Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (C98)                      | ✓ |
| Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (C-100)   | ✓ |
| Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (C-111)                     | ✓ |

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) works closely with the Mauritanian government and other stakeholders to protect and promote human rights. Its mandate includes providing technical assistance, monitoring human rights violations, and having unrestricted access to detention facilities. Current priorities focus on non-discrimination, women's and girls' rights (with emphasis on GBV), economic and social rights, and capacity-building for security forces, judiciary, government officials, NHRIs, and CSOs. OHCHR conducts training workshops for civil society and law enforcement.

**The UN Treaty bodies and charter bodies have made observations particular to the slavery practice in Mauritania. Some key observations include :**

■ **The UN Human Rights Committee**, in its concluding observations on Mauritania's report in August 2019, raised concerns about the ongoing presence of slavery and the challenges faced by slavery victims in seeking justice. Additionally, the United States ended its trade agreement with Mauritania on January 1 2019, due to instances of forced labour and retaliatory actions against activists fighting against slavery. The committee also raised concerns on the continued marginalisation of the CDWD – Hratin and black African communities in accessing education, healthcare, employment, and housing, among other services.

■ **The UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery**, including its causes and consequences, Mr. Tomoya Obokata, (May 2022), observed that the adoption of Law 2015-031 criminalising slavery and slavery-like practices is a good step by the government of Mauritania. However, additional and urgent measures are required to implement anti-slavery legislation effectively and to address obstacles to accessing justice.

He observed the prevalence and persistence of descent-based and contemporary forms of slavery in the country, within and among the country's major ethnic groups and between certain groups. Furthermore, persons from repressed castes who refute their slave status face violent reprisals and denial of access to essential services by dominant castes. He cautioned that child labour remains a concern, particularly forced begging also impacting their access to education. A strengthened effort is required for increased reporting, protection and assistance to the victims of slavery and full application of penalties.

■ **The UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism**, Mr Mutuma Ruteere, in the 2014 HRC session, described Mauritanian society as 'deeply stratified' with discrimination along ethnic or caste lines. He also encouraged the government to tackle caste discrimination. An earlier visit to Mauritania was done in 2008 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism, Mr. Doudou Diène. He observed in the 2009 HRC session that continuing discriminatory practices of an ethnic and racial nature have deeply marked Mauritanian society. These are rooted in cultural traditions and are pervasive in social structures, attitudes and principal institutions of the State, in particular the armed forces and justice system<sup>23</sup>.

- **The UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Slavery**, Ms Gulnara Shahinian, in the 2010 HRC session maintained the existence of caste-based slavery in Mauritania and stated that all forms of slavery exist in the country – child labour, domestic labour, child marriages and human trafficking<sup>24</sup>.
- In its Concluding Observations issued on July 18, 2014, the **UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** recommended that the state party take decisive measures to completely dismantle the caste-based system that enslaves women in domestic work, particularly in the section on employment<sup>25</sup>.
- **The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)** also noted rampant caste-based slavery when reviewing the State Party in 2004. The committee noted that the linguistic composition of the population is inadequate to capture the complexity of Mauritanian society and regretted that the economic and social indicators provided for the committee were not disaggregated by descent or ethnic origin. It raised concern about the continued existence of the caste system in the country<sup>26</sup>.
- **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, in its 2009 session, expressed concern over the lack of implementation of the law. The committee is seriously concerned over reports indicating the continued existence of caste-based slavery, which has a particular impact on girls in domestic service and boys forced to beg by marabouts<sup>27</sup>.

## Key Observations By Relevant ILO Conventions

**Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, 111th ILC session (2023):** The committee emphasised that, in the face of such a complex and controversial phenomenon, it was essential to reinforce the multi-sectoral approach and ensure coordinated action, particularly by adopting an action plan against forced labour and slavery. It called for the effective application of the 2015 anti-slavery law<sup>28</sup>.

**Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), 111th ILC session (2023):** The committee noted with concern the existence of forced or compulsory labour of children, particularly begging, sale and trafficking of children and worst forms of child labour. It urged the government to take the necessary steps to effectively apply Ordinance No. 2005-015 to protect children under criminal law. It also urged the government to provide information on marabouts who exploit the children for begging and on prosecution and the criminal penalties imposed. It observed to strengthen the capacities of responsible entities for better application of legislation to combat the sale and trafficking of children<sup>29</sup>.

**Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138); 111th ILC session (2023):** The committee urged the government to continue its efforts to ensure the progressive elimination of child labour and to provide information on the activities and results achieved in this regard. It raised concern that the employment of children in informal family enterprises, including in hazardous conditions, appeared to be widespread in the country<sup>30</sup>.



## Chapter 7

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Effective application of laws and regulations enacted to combat slavery, discrimination, and modern slavery.
2. Involve CDWD organisations in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating programs dedicated for the CDWD.
3. Extend the participation of vulnerable groups, civil society organisations, and opposition parties in the management of national institutions to ensure participatory, transparent, and inclusive governance.
4. Specify the expenditure and subsidies allocated for CDWDs by creating a dedicated budget heading for social protection and vulnerability institutions.
5. Provide funding for CDWD women's cooperatives.
6. Grant higher education scholarships to young individuals, both CDWD girls and boys.
7. Facilitate scholarships granted by the international community to slavery victims in Mauritania, with priority given to girls.
8. Ensure compulsory and effective school education for children up to the age of majority through scholarships.
9. Formalise and provide a framework for the tenant farming system and the practice of tacheronnat.
10. Extend social protection and strengthen legal safeguards for workers.
11. Establish special funds through regional and international financial institutions to support NGOs led by and working on CDWD rights, and communities victimised by slavery (Hratin, Komo and other CDWDs).
12. Conduct a comprehensive census to accurately determine the total CDWD population to enable better policymaking.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Global Refugee Trends 2005

<sup>8</sup>Trading Economics, 2022

<sup>9</sup>Mauritania - Enquête Démographique et de Santé de La Mauritanie 2019-2021, n.d.

<sup>10</sup>WHO 2020

<sup>11</sup>“Adwaba” are agricultural villages in Mauritania, mainly inhabited by former slaves and other so-called lower castes.

<sup>12</sup>Census 2022, ANSADE

<sup>13</sup>MMP-I Mauritania launches Multidimensional Poverty Index, 13 March, 2023, <https://www.mppn.org/mauritania-launches-multidimensional-poverty-index/>

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<sup>19</sup>TIP 2022, Trafficking in Persons Report July 2022, US Department of State, 2023, [accessed June 13, 2023]

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<sup>25</sup>Concluding Observations, CEDAW/C/MRT/CO/2-3

<sup>26</sup>Concluding Observations, CERD/C/65/CO/5

<sup>27</sup>Concluding Observations, CRC/C/MRT/CO/2

<sup>28</sup>Observation 2023, Forced Labour Convention, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:4321212,103075](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_COUNTRY_ID:4321212,103075)

<sup>29</sup>Observation 2023, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:4313098,103075](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_COUNTRY_ID:4313098,103075)

<sup>30</sup>Observation 2023, Minimum Age Convention, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID,P13100\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:4313089,103075](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID,P13100_COUNTRY_ID:4313089,103075)





Country Report

# Mauritania



## The Inclusivity Project and Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

2023

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