

# Slavery Report: Mauritania

## Latest Developments

Unlike other African nations in which slavery exists, Mauritania is blessed with its own well-organized abolitionist community. Several abolitionist organizations continue to operate, including the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist ([IRA](#)), which lobbies the government to enforce its bans on slavery, and [SOS Esclaves](#) (“SOS Slaves”) which shelters and takes testimony from runaway slaves.

No progress towards enforcement of anti-slavery laws or loosening of Arab repression has been demonstrated recently. On August 7, 2018, Biram Dah Abeid, an anti-slavery activist with the IRA, was [arrested](#) and later [imprisoned](#) for running for parliament.

Abeid is not alone among his fellow anti-slavery and human rights activists’ troubles. A July 21, 2018 *Economist* [article](#) reports that

the government denies slavery or racial discrimination still exist. Under pressure, it has set up four slavery courts, but these have convicted only five people since 2015 for slaving offences. None of them served more than two years. The government is far more energetic in suppressing anti-slavery protesters, arresting more of them than actual slavers. There have been at least 168 arrests of human-rights campaigners from July 2014 to July 2018, says Amnesty International, a human-rights organisation. Two leading anti-slavery activists, Moussa Biram and Abdallahi Matallah, have been tortured and kept in prison for two years.

France, Spain, and the United Kingdom have recently led efforts to [increase](#) E.U. funding for the G5 Sahel group, of which Mauritania is a member, by £85 million (\$108 million) a year, a subsidy intended to stem migration to Europe. In 2017, a [budget](#) of €423 million (nearly \$480 million) was set aside, to which the increase will be added. The U.S. State Department should urge the E.U. to deny Mauritania this subsidy until it can demonstrate that it will enforce its 2007 [criminalization](#) of slavery.

After his release from prison on January 1, 2019, Abeid formally [called](#) for the E.U. to cut funding to Mauritania. He also courageously ran for president in the June 22, 2019 elections, pledging to enforce the country’s anti-slavery laws, though he [lost](#) handily to the long-time Arab president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Abeid later announced that he [contested](#) the results.

The Mauritanian government also routinely expels and denies entry or re-entry to human rights groups and investigators. According to a 2017 U.S. State Department [report](#), on April 28, 2016, the government expelled two French human rights researchers from the country, not allowing them to return. On August 21, it denied entry to a foreign anti-slavery organization, and November 20,

a “major” (but unspecified) human rights organization was denied entry into the country, despite a long history of being allowed to enter and then return.

## Number of Slaves

In 1993, a U.S. State Department [report](#) estimated that between 30,000 and 90,000 blacks were enslaved out of a population of 2 million. By 2012, with the population having swollen to 3.4 million, a CNN [investigation](#) estimated between 340,000 and 680,000 blacks likely perform slave labor of some nature (though the higher numbers likely originate from better sources of information over the years rather than a massive growth in the slave population over a single generation). Where in the 1990s around 4.5% of the population was likely enslaved, CNN’s estimates suggest that that figure is at least double what was estimated a generation ago:

An estimated 10% to 20% of Mauritania’s 3.4 million people are enslaved — in “real slavery,” according to the United Nations’ special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Gulnara Shahinian.

The State Department’s 2018 human rights [report](#) disputes CNN’s numbers, saying simply that, “Although reliable data on the total number of slaves did not exist and the government maintained there was no slavery, local and international experts agreed hereditary slavery and slavery-like conditions continued to affect a significant portion of the population in both rural and urban settings.”

## History and Background

Mauritania is one of the oldest and purest remaining instances of chattel slavery in the world. Muslim Arabs first conquered western North Africa in the eighth century, colonizing a sparsely populated area inhabited by black Africans and Berber nomads. As Arab power grew, it pushed Berber tribes southwards from the oases, thus forcing the black population further south into the more arid regions. After several failed uprisings against Arab rule, the Berbers relented and finally decided to Arabize and adopt Islam in the seventeenth century. Most black tribes, however, having been forced down to the Senegal River, only accepted Islam nearly a thousand years after the Arab conquest. Blacks who remained in the northern territories were forced into slavery. Over the generations, Arabo-Berber slavery expanded south and engulfed more of the black population.

This [history](#) has created a cruel caste system in which the lighter-skinned Arabs (*beydanes*) and Arabized Berbers rule over the black former slaves who have been forcibly Arabized over time (*haratin*), those free blacks in the south who refuse Arabization calling themselves “Negro-Africans,” and the black chattel slave class (*abid*) at the bottom. Though the country is entirely Muslim, and Islam theoretically forbids the enslavement of one Muslim by another, the severity of Arab racism even supersedes adherence to the Shari‘ah.

French colonial officials attempted to abolish slavery within the territory in both 1901 and 1905. All such legislation proved worthless in Mauritania’s 400,000-square-mile, arid, indifferent vastness. Five similar proclamations in 1961, 1980, 1981, 2007, and 2015 have as of now proved equally fruitless.

No slave markets exist in Mauritania. All slaves are born in masters' households from the master raping black slave women, or ordering necessary episodes of sexual activity ("breeding") between couples of slaves. In the absence of open markets, slaves change hands quietly in individual sales, are traded as substitutes for money in the settling of gambling debts, or can even be rented.

### **Experiences of the Slaves**

Due to the closed and suspicious nature of Mauritanian society, relatively little comprehensive or groundbreaking information concerning the human rights situation in the country has been obtained between the 1990s and more recent years.

A June 29, 1990 Human Rights Watch / Africa [report](#) on Mauritanian slavery details the horrific tortures masters inflict upon slaves. In the "camel treatment,"

The slave's legs are tied to the sides of a camel who has deliberately been denied water for up to two weeks. The camel is then taken to drink and as the camel's stomach expands, the slave's legs, thighs and groin, are slowly dislocated.

In the "insect treatment,"

Tiny insects are stuffed into the ears of the victims and small stones are used to ensure that the insects remain inside the ear. A headscarf is then tied around the head. The victim's hands and feet are also tied up to prevent movement. The scarf and stones are removed after several days, by which time the victim's mind is destroyed.

Such horrendous forms of punishment are inflicted if a slave is accused of

disobeying the master's orders, attempting to escape or even the mere suspicion of wanting to escape, being in contact with free blacks, inciting other slaves to escape and sexual relations with [any members of] the master's family. The punishment is intended both to punish the individual, but also to serve as an example to others (p. 15).

In a special human rights [investigation](#) conducted between December 23, 1995 and January 17, 1996, journalist [Sam Cotton](#) interviewed anti-slavery activists, runaway slaves, former slaves, and even current slaves. In his 1998 [book](#), *Silent Terror: A Journey into Contemporary African Slavery*, in which he published his findings, Cotton describes how Arab anti-black racism is engrained so deeply in Mauritanian society that it is not obvious in public:

The racism to be found in Mauritania is not readily apparent to most visitors because the Mauritanian Arab interacts with blacks far differently than does the white man of the American South or the Boer of South Africa. ...Mauritania has no overtly racially discriminatory laws. Blacks and whites are not forced to attend separate schools or live in separate neighborhoods....

The problem is that Mauritania's Arabs sincerely believe that blacks are inferior and are born to be slaves. They believe that a black man, woman, or child's place in life is to serve an Arab master, and it does not matter to them whether that black [person] is a Christian or a fellow Muslim. The Arabs don't believe that they have to make any laws to stop interracial marriage [for instance] because they think it's a disgrace for an Arab to marry a black person, anyway. Historically, the autocratic Beydane-run government has never really bothered to create any [such] laws, except for cosmetic reasons. Arab cultural attitudes and beliefs that support slavery and deny equal access to black Africans are the *real* law (pp. 99 – 100).

In the November 1996 issue of *Vibe* magazine, a refugee named El Hadj Demba Ba [explained](#) to American journalist Jesse Washington how slavery alters the psychology of black Mauritians:

When you become friendly with freed Haratines, they treat you just like their superior. They come to your house and want to do the dirty jobs. You have to remind them: "You sleep with me [in the house], you eat with me, whatever we do, we do it together." But some of them refuse it, and you end up hating them. I talked to those who are in the deepness of slavery, [and] I tell them, "You can work for your own self and be free, like me." They say, "I don't think I can make it without my master. My master gives me food, the clothes I am wearing. What else can I do? I've never been to school. I don't own any property. Where am I going to live if I run away? (p. 102)

### **Political Developments**

In a positive development, however, the Trump administration [announced](#) on November 5, 2018 that it was depriving Mauritania of its "preferential trade partner" status as of January 1, 2019 in response to the country's "insufficient progress toward combating forced labor, in particular the scourge of hereditary slavery."