



**Unrepresented Nations  
and Peoples Organization**

## **Slavery in Mauritania**

### ***Briefing Note, October 2013***

On **14 October 2013**, the Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament will be holding a hearing on the subject of **Contemporary Forms of Slavery in the Sahel Region**. In light of this hearing, UNPO has prepared this briefing note, which we hope will bring solid background information to the situation in Mauritania, a key country in the Sahel when it comes to slavery.

**This 3-page briefing includes sections on:**

- Mauritanian society
- The State and other actors involved
- Slavery's legal and traditional framework
- Life as a slave in Mauritania
- Former slaves and their needs
- Paths for a way out
- Recommendations to the European Union

#### **About UNPO:**

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognized or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

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#### **About Biram Dah Abeid:**

Mr. Abeid, a descendant of slaves himself, will be speaking at the hearing in his capacity of President of IRA Mauritania (the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement). He is at the forefront of the struggle against slavery in Mauritania and faces the death penalty for his activism and efforts to bring slave-owners to justice. He was awarded the Frontline Defenders Human Rights Defenders Award in May 2013.



## Slavery in Mauritania

It is widely acknowledged that Mauritania is one of the countries in which slavery is the most deeply anchored (20% of the population). The type of slavery practiced there also adds to the importance of the phenomenon: slaves in Mauritania are not trafficked and rarely bought or sold. Instead, they **inherit** their status through their mother, working for the same families generation after generation. Rather than being physically forced to obey their masters, Mauritanian slaves are psychologically bonded through centuries of tradition which have come to justify slavery even in a slave's mind.

### Mauritanian Society

Slavery in Mauritania is widely accepted by the ruling, upper and middle classes – who, incidentally, are those who perpetuate the practice. Slave-owners and the ruling class are of Arab-Berber origin, also referred to as **Beydanes** or White Moors.

Slaves in Mauritania, also called ab'd (plural: abids), come from a number of different backgrounds, but are always Black Africans who were present in Mauritania since its beginnings. Slaves in Mauritania represent around **20% of the population, or around 708 000 people**. Most slaves are part of a group called the **Haratin**. Other Black Africans who live in the South of the country include the Soninké, Peul, Bambara, Wolof...

The majority of Mauritania's population is brought up to speak **Arabic** and most have chosen **Islam** as their religion – although several other languages and religions do exist in the country. **French** is still used for official purposes and is spoken by educated classes.

Drafting a map of Mauritania's diversity is a hard task and has been a source of tensions for years. This is in part because there has been **no census** of the population recently, meaning there are

very few sources of information about the composition of Mauritanian society. The official statements tend to lower the figures of Haratins (or slaves) who live in Mauritania, while human rights activists attempt to raise awareness as to the true situation faced by a fifth of the population.

### The State and the actors involved

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is led today by **President Ould Abdel Aziz**, who came to power in 2008 following a military coup d'état orchestrated against the previous government. In 2009, he won the elections organized post-coup and is known for his near-dictatorial style of leadership. He and his government have repeatedly denied the existence of slavery in Mauritania, citing it as a thing of the past.

The state relies on a mixture of **French civil law and more traditional Shari'a law** to rule and govern. However, Shari'a primes over other aspects of Mauritanian law. Since the Quran allows for certain forms of slavery, despite citing that all Muslims are equal before Allah, the government has repeatedly justified slavery by backing their position with references to the Shari'a.

### Slavery: a legal framework vs. tradition

As seen, Shari'a law provides the government with justifications about the existence of slavery. However, **Mauritania officially banned slavery in 1980 and, in 2007, criminalized the practice** (only one person has been condemned so far) – largely to abate international pressure. However, there were problems with these laws as there was no clear definition of *who* might be considered a slave. Also, compensation was provided to the owners – and not the slaves themselves!

But dealing with the traditional mindset surrounding slavery is another issue. Libbie Snyder writes that “Mauritania’s slavery is



unique for its quality of acceptance amongst all members of society so that escaped or freed slaves are not welcomed and face limited to zero opportunities for success of advancement. Ultimately, enslavement in Mauritania is more of a mental mindset than a physical constraint". In a *New Yorker* article, William Finnegan writes about his interview with a former Mauritanian slave, Moctar Teyeb, who said, "Slavery is a state of mind, and most Haratin believe the slavery system is part of Allah's command. They don't know another way of life" - also stating, **"Religion is a big part of the system. To be against slavery is to be against religion"**.

### Life as a slave

Living conditions of slaves in Mauritania often resemble those faced by slaves in the previous century. Slaves perform **household chores** or work in **subsistence agriculture** or **herding cattle, goats or camels**. Masters deliberately keep their slaves untrained in specific skills or tasks, assigning them to menial jobs. This is to ensure that, should he/she escape or be freed, a slave would have as little resources as possible to fend for themselves in the "free" world. With no education and no vocational training slaves are offered no possibilities to survive if freed.

Slaves **may not marry freely**. The masters usually decide who gets to marry who, going as far as arranging marriages between stronger slaves with the plan to use their children as slaves in the future. Women and girls are regularly subject to sexual violence from their masters. Slaves born from master-slave relationships do not belong to the mother: they can be given to one of the master's wives as a present or to different family members and/or friends. **These children can also be sold (girls having more value than boys because of their value as sexual objects)**.

As Moctar Teyeb, former Mauritanian slave, said to *The New Yorker* in 2000, "The Haratins are not usually held by physical force. They are not

always living in the same place as their master. But they still have the relationship, wherever they are. They are still slaves. Their master can call them and they must come. He can take their children. He can give their children as gifts to relatives or his friends".

Mauritania is a **country with very little communication or transport infrastructure**, meaning that "culture is isolated: there are very few sources of information, most of which are controlled by the government. International news on television and in the press focuses on the Arab world, concentrating on the international struggle for greater Islamic purity and never touching on human rights. If the illiterate majority of slaves could read, there would be virtually nothing they could learn that did not reinforce the status quo".

### Escaping from Slavery

Since slaves in Mauritania are not held by shackles, several have managed to escape in the past, especially men. Although punishment for attempting to escape can be very harsh, some choose to take the risk. However, life as a freed slave can sometimes be just as hard, if not harder, than life as a slave. The Haratin label will not disappear overnight, making former slaves easy targets for discrimination of all sorts – racism, on the job market, in education, etc... With little skills and no notion of life as an independent citizen, escaped slaves have an extremely hard time integrating society and finding a way to provide for themselves and their families. **Often-time uneducated and illiterate, there are few activities to take up other than those they were already forced to do as slaves** (farming, domestic work, herding).

In a recent report on the transition from informal to formal economy, the ILO identifies challenges facing those who have grown to work in the informal economy: there is a wide skills gap resulting from a lack of education and leading to



a “vicious circle of low productivity, low income and low investment in skills”. The ILO pinpoints one solution: the necessity for informal economy workers to improve their skills so as to access productive and gainful jobs. Of course, for this to be possible in Mauritania, the mindset needs to change in the upper class: a Haratin or Black African can no longer be regarded as a slave, a commodity, but rather as someone eager to integrate society and learn a new set of skills, ready to be paid fairly for his/her services.

### A Way Out

As Mauritania stands today, absolute freedom for former slaves is difficult to achieve because of the lack of possibilities for them. Current alternatives seldom amount to freedom, meaning there is huge potential for improvement. Breaking the pattern and creating new possibilities for freed slaves is a priority for Mauritania, and easily applies to other countries struggling with slavery.

Local **NGOs** and associations, as well as budding **trade unions** and **political parties** are active in the field: working to free slaves, bringing slave-owners to justice, combating racism, raising awareness in slave communities, rescuing slaves, offering education and training, etc... The possibilities are endless where the situation is so dire. Focus needs to be given to **vocational training programs for former slaves**, whose only way out is to be able to make a living for themselves.

Several international organizations and governments have provided funding for the development of **grassroots projects**. International media have also played a role in **raising awareness** about Mauritania's situation, increasingly pressuring governments to act against slavery.

Unfortunately, Mauritania's key position on the African continent and its relations with Northern Africa do not allow foreign governments to negatively target it and denounce slavery too loudly.

### Recommendations to the European Union:

- Exercise pressure - in all contexts - on the Mauritanian government in matters of human rights, focusing on abolition of slavery, and urge them to apply their own laws.
- Raise awareness amongst EU countries of the existence of slavery in Mauritania and the absence of action taken against slave-owners.
- Fund and support grass-roots initiatives which work to empower former slaves, leading them to economic and cultural freedom.
- Encourage national embassies on the ground to raise the issue of slavery in their bilateral relations with the Mauritanian government.
- Continue to support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, who contributes to independent research and analysis on slavery across the world.
- Encourage work “at home”, within the European Union, in combatting forms of modern slavery and human trafficking – as well as raising awareness on slavery’s strong presence in supply chains and the global market.

