

# report

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## Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women





**Haratine woman, Nouakchott.**

Michael Hylton for Anti-Slavery International.

### **Acknowledgements**

This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Minority Rights Group International and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union. MRG wishes to thank Anti-Slavery International (ASI) for their support

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MRG wishes to gratefully acknowledge Isabelle Younane's valuable research assistance, and the interviews conducted by Aichetou Ahmed and Salimata Lam for the case studies.

### **L'Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille**

The Association of Women Heads of Family (AFCF) is a human rights organization founded in 1999 through authorization receipt No. 0626 /Ministry of Interior, dated August 17, 1999. AFCF is run by a multidisciplinary team of sociologists, nutritionists and development specialists in economics and communication.



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**ISBN 978-1-907919-60-2. Published April 2015.**

**Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women** is published by MRG as a contribution to public understanding of the issue which forms its subject. The text and views of the author do not necessarily represent in every detail and all its aspects, the collective view of MRG.

### **SOS-Esclaves**

SOS-Esclaves (SOS for Slaves) is a human rights association that has been active since 1995 and was legally recognized in 2005 by authorization receipt No. 0069/Ministry of Interior/Department of Public Liberties/Division of Public Liberties, dated 17/05/2005. It works primarily for the eradication of slavery by descent and has become an authoritative resource in this field with the support of Anti-Slavery International, which provided institutional support that helped it achieve its professionalization.

### **Minority Rights Group International**

MRG is an NGO working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide partner network of organizations, which represent minority and indigenous peoples.

MRG works with over 150 organizations in nearly 50 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law. Registered charity no. 282305, limited company no. 1544957).

# Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women

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# Key findings

## Key findings

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slavery is still widespread in Mauritania, despite officially being criminalized, with tens of thousands of the country's Haratine population living in total servitude. Enslaved Haratines, particularly women, are regularly beaten, intimidated, forcibly separated from their families and subjected to a range of other human rights violations, including sexual assault.</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These inequalities are enabled by the indifference and even complicity of authorities and legal institutions. Slavery and other forms of exploitation persist in large part because of the impunity of the perpetrators. Without access to justice, political participation and other rights, Haratine women remain vulnerable to exploitation, sexual assault and other abuses. Despite this, many Haratine women have worked courageously to overcome these barriers to achieve greater autonomy in their own lives.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The dehumanization of Haratines in Mauritania, besides sustaining these abuses, also exposes them to stigmatization beyond the slavery system. The situation is especially acute for women, who are discriminated against on account of both their gender and their status as Haratine. As a result, even after escaping servitude, freed Haratines and their descendants are unable to secure basic services such as education and struggle to integrate into Mauritanian society.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The immediate implementation of the ban on slavery, undertaken with the full commitment of the state and law enforcement agencies, is a necessary and urgent first step in ensuring the protection of Haratine women from gross human rights abuses. However, a more comprehensive programme of social, legal and institutional reform must also be undertaken to ensure that free and formerly enslaved Haratine women are able to access rights, services and life opportunities safely and equitably.</li></ul>               |

# Executive Summary

Mauritania is consistently ranked as the worst place in the world for slavery, with tens of thousands still trapped in total servitude across the country. This practice, despite officially being criminalized, continues to be sustained by the systematic marginalization of Mauritania's large Haratine population. The persistent failure of the government, security forces and other stakeholders to protect this group has left them exposed to widespread exploitation and dehumanization. The situation is especially precarious for Haratine women, who are discriminated against on account of both their gender and ethnicity.

This report by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), *Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women*, draws on extensive research and first-hand testimony from Haratine women. Besides highlighting the everyday reality of abuse and oppression experienced by those in servitude – ranging from exploitative labour, intimidation and confinement to rape, violence and the enforced separation of families – it also explores how formerly enslaved Haratines and their descendants still face widespread stigmatization and lack access to necessities such as education, land rights and political participation. As a result, many former slaves struggle to integrate into Mauritanian society even once they have nominally secured their freedom.

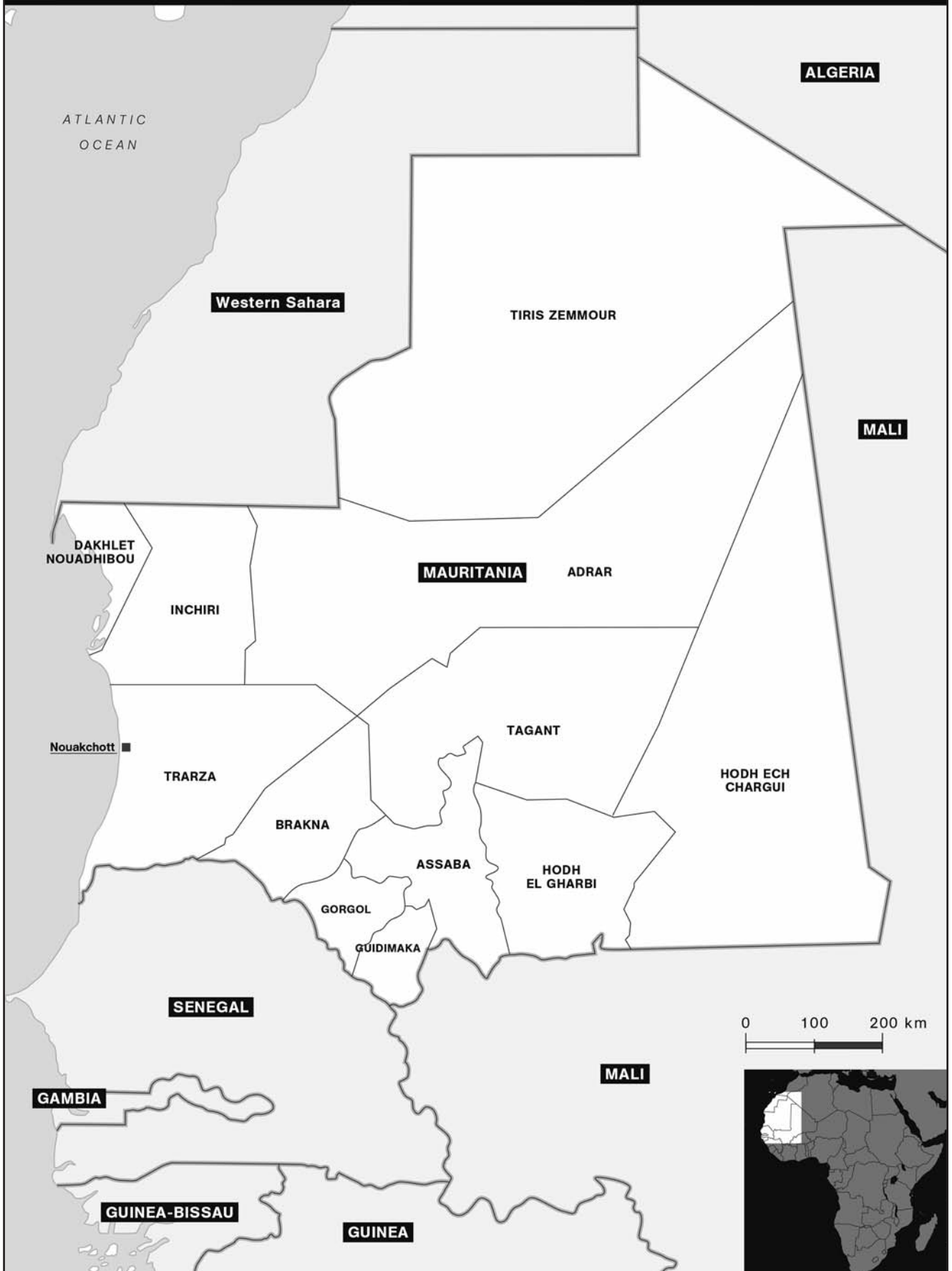
The deep discrimination experienced by Haratine women, even among their own community, is driven by the reluctance of authorities to take meaningful action to curb abuses. In the case of slavery, the indifference and even complicity of law enforcement agencies has actively contributed to the impunity enjoyed by slave masters. To date, only one full prosecution of a slave owner has taken

place in Mauritania, with the perpetrator subsequently released on bail pending an appeal. Religious teachings have also been misused to justify the practice. Further legal measures against slavery, though important, will therefore have limited effectiveness without broader efforts to transform institutional attitudes and social prejudice through training and awareness raising.

Nevertheless, although these obstacles can be overwhelming, many Haratine women have demonstrated great courage and determination in their fight for equality and greater autonomy in their own lives. Despite the dangers and the deep resistance their activities attract, including from male members of their own community, Haratine women have played a leading role in advocating for their rights and legal redress for the abuses committed against them. It is important that official bodies, civil society and other stakeholders recognize their essential contribution and ensure their active involvement in efforts to end exploitation and discrimination.

Though the immediate abolition of slavery in Mauritania is a critical first step in reducing many of the worst rights abuses against Haratine women, a wider process of social and institutional reform will also be required before their rights and security can be ensured. At present, as the accounts of those interviewed for this study demonstrate, there is a clear continuum between the oppression of the slavery system and the deep-seated discrimination in Mauritania against Haratine women in general. These issues can only be addressed by a comprehensive and sustained process of social and institutional reform, with the involvement of the national government, Mauritanian civil society, legal institutions and the international community.

# Mauritania



# Introduction

## Slavery in Mauritania

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) has long been concerned about the situation of the Haratine minority in Mauritania. This group, known colloquially as ‘Black Moors’, have historically been enslaved by the dominant Arab Berber population, or ‘White Moors’. While slavery has been outlawed in Mauritania four times over more than a century, reports indicate that the practice persists. After visiting Mauritania for the first time in 2010, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences (hereafter Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery), definitively concluded that de facto slavery still exists in parts of Mauritania:

*‘the victims described situations whereby they were completely controlled by their owner using physical and/or mental threats; could not independently make any decision related to their lives without his or her master’s permission; were treated as commodities – for example, girls being given away as wedding presents; lacked freedom of movement; and were forced to work long hours with very little or no remuneration. In addition, the victims were further denied the right to inherit. These victims had escaped slavery and talked about the relatives that they had left behind who still lived in slavery.’<sup>1</sup>*

The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery visited Mauritania again in 2014, while her counterpart the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance (hereafter Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism) visited in 2008 and 2014. Both issued substantive mission reports, despite the difficulties in accessing information on this highly sensitive issue and the lack of disaggregated data on population, ethnicity and livelihood available in Mauritania.<sup>2</sup> According to the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, an estimated 50 per cent of Haratines live in ‘conditions of de facto slavery through domestic servitude and bonded or forced labour’.<sup>3</sup> For their part, in 2013 Anti-Slavery International (ASI), MRG and SOS-Esclaves reported that an estimated 18 per cent

of Mauritania’s population live in slavery.<sup>4</sup> In a context of growing international awareness of the persistence of slavery in Mauritania, in November 2014 the Australian non-governmental organization (NGO) Walk Free Foundation, in its second annual global report on slavery, again listed Mauritania as the country with the highest percentage of slaves among its population in the world.<sup>5</sup>

## Discrimination against Haratines as a group

The word ‘Haratine’ is reportedly derived from the Arabic word for freedom: regardless of their status, enslaved or free, the legacy of institutionalized hereditary slavery in Mauritania is that all Haratines are regarded by other groups in Mauritania as freed slaves.<sup>6</sup> This perception pertains regardless of how many generations of freedom any given family has enjoyed or their socioeconomic level, with concrete results. They remain the group that is most discriminated against and excluded in a country characterized by deep-seated social and ethnic hierarchies.

Clearly, then, while anti-slavery efforts are an essential part of efforts to redress their situation, abolition is only a first step to establishing Haratines as full and equal participants in Mauritanian society. With this in mind, a Haratine Manifesto for a broad spectrum of political, economic and social rights of Haratines was published in Nouakchott in April 2013.<sup>7</sup> A year later, a march was held to reiterate the manifesto’s demands.<sup>8</sup>

## The situation of women in Mauritania

In Mauritania, women of all racial, ethnic and cultural groups face a host of challenges to the enjoyment of the full range of their human rights. The country was ranked 140th out of 149 countries included in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report’s* most recent Gender Inequality Index, taking into account three aspects of women’s lives: reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity.<sup>9</sup> In recent years the Mauritanian government’s efforts to redress this situation have included national strategies to combat the practice of female genital mutilation and to promote the welfare of rural women.<sup>10</sup>

However, though a draft Act on Violence against Women is reportedly pending, there is no overarching national gender strategy.<sup>11</sup>

Within this context, Haratine women and girls as a group are particularly vulnerable due to the deeply entrenched practices of enslavement and discrimination described above. Of all the groups in Mauritania, they are perhaps the most disenfranchised: first as Haratine, and again as women. With this piece of research MRG seeks to contribute to the base of available knowledge regarding the situation of Haratine women, in the hopes that raising awareness of the challenges they continue to face will help to inform more effective programming to redress the vast inequalities they face.

## Methodology

The research for this report was conducted in two parts. Initially, MRG commissioned a baseline study on the situation of Haratine women in the capital Nouakchott, carried out by Mauritanian NGOs the Association of Women Heads of Family (Association des Femmes Chefs de Familles [AFCF]) and SOS-Esclaves (SOS-Slaves). The second part of the research focused on personal interviews, conducted by female interlocutors, with 20 Haratine women. The interviews included a set questions covering a range of aspects of their daily lives such as livelihood; family life; personal experiences as Haratine women; and views on the future. Excerpts from interviews can be found throughout the text.



# Historical overview of Haratine slavery in Mauritania

## Context

Mauritania is an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse country of 3.9 million inhabitants. Though many of its citizens were traditionally nomadic, as elsewhere in the Sahel drought and desertification have disrupted livelihoods and forced increasing numbers of people into the towns, including the principal city Nouakchott. Mauritania ranks 161st out of 187 countries in the 2014 UN Human Development Index. In the context of climate change and acute water shortages, and following cyclical droughts such as the one that affected the Sahel region in 2011, 18.5 per cent of households suffered from food insecurity as of December 2013.<sup>12</sup> This has been further exacerbated by the presence of tens of thousands of refugees in Mauritania fleeing conflict in neighbouring Mali.<sup>13</sup>

Mauritania is a Muslim country, the population of which can broadly be divided into three groups: Black Mauritians, White Moors (or 'Beydan') and Haratines (also known as 'Black Moors'). Black Mauritians historically settled around the Senegal River in the south and east of the country. The remaining groups, White Moors and Haratines, speak the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic. White Moors and Black Mauritians comprise roughly 30 per cent of the population each, with Haratines making up the remainder<sup>14</sup> – though exact figures are unavailable and estimates of these proportions vary.

White Moors are believed to be descendants of Arab Berbers who migrated to Mauritania in the eleventh century. Their control of much of Mauritania's economic, political, administrative and military power, and the resulting 'Arabization' of Mauritanian policy and political identity since independence in 1960, have contributed to several periods of ethnic unrest and violence. In the late 1980s, for instance, tens of thousands of Senegalese and Black Mauritians were expelled from or otherwise forced to leave Mauritania. The dominance of the White Moors has continued to the present day.

## Origins of slavery

Slavery dates back hundreds of years in Mauritania, from a period when Arab Berbers raided and enslaved black Africans settled along the Senegal River, dominating and eventually assimilating them into their own social system.

It existed among several different groups in Mauritania but, as described in the introduction, was historically most prevalent among the group of concern in this paper, the Haratine – a situation that remains in place to this day. Among this group, enslavement to White Moor masters has been hereditary for many generations, and is deeply rooted in social traditions and systems. Haratines who are still in slavery work long hours for no pay, and are entirely dependent on their masters for food, clothing and shelter. They generally receive no education or training. They live at the whim of their owners, and can be subjected to ill-treatment, rape and other violence, as well as separated from their families and loved ones.

Religious beliefs are manipulated to support this system, perpetuating misperceptions that link elements of Islam with the practice of slavery.<sup>15</sup> Due to lack of education and the dominance of their masters, many slaves may themselves believe that their situation is justified in these terms.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to counter the misperception, the drafters of the eventual 2007 law criminalizing slavery grounded it firmly, in its very first article, in Islamic values 'designed to free mankind and guarantee its dignity'.<sup>17</sup> More recently, in December 2014, the government required all mosques to give an obligatory unified sermon (*khotba*) about Islam's rejection of slavery. However, at least one high-profile imam reportedly did not comply, instead criticizing human rights organizations engaged in the struggle against racism and slavery.<sup>18</sup>

## Abolition and beyond: dealing with slavery and its legacy

Internationally, a growing legal framework has been built up over past decades to combat slavery, including many conventions ratified by Mauritania. Furthermore, within the country itself multiple efforts to abolish slavery domestically have been undertaken since the beginning of the twentieth century. This section outlines this legislation and discusses its limited effectiveness.

### International legal framework

Under the 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery (Slavery Convention), states parties commit to bringing about the complete abolition of slavery, defined

as ‘the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised’.<sup>19</sup> The Slavery Convention was augmented by a 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. The latter incorporates articles on the abolition of debt bondage, child labour and serfdom. Forced marriage is also included, defined as a situation when ‘a woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family or any other person or group’. Under the supplementary convention, the states parties undertake to set appropriate minimum ages of marriage and establish mechanisms for ensuring that both parties freely consent to marriage and registration of marriages.<sup>20</sup>

Other relevant instruments cited in the text below include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both ratified by Mauritania on 17 November 2004; the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, ratified by Mauritania on 10 May 2001; and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, ratified by Mauritania on 13 December 1988.

## Domestic legal framework

The international legal conventions against slavery are also supported by Mauritania’s domestic legislation. Over the decades, slavery has been legally abolished a number of times in the country. The first was in 1905, via a colonial decree implementing an 1848 French law abolishing slavery in all French colonies. The second followed independence in 1960, through the 1961 Constitution. In 1981, slavery was abolished by Order 081-234; it provided for compensation to masters for loss of property. However, its impact was hampered by the vagueness of its wording and the lack of practical mechanisms for enforcing it. Finally, Slavery Act 2007-048 was passed in September 2007, criminalizing slavery and slavery-like practices and imposing sentences of 5 to 10 years’ imprisonment and fines for those found guilty of perpetrating them. The Act also provides for assistance and compensation for victims.<sup>21</sup>

Critics of the Act point out that it focuses on the individual criminal responsibility of slave owners and can therefore only be activated through a formal criminal complaint and prosecution – formidable challenges for former slaves, many of whom are illiterate. They express concern at an apparent reluctance on the part of police and prosecutors to adequately investigate those complaints that are lodged,<sup>22</sup> and note that to date there is no active

mechanism for civil proceedings for reparation or compensation of victims. Critics also point to the Act’s failure to provide mechanisms for its application or to address issues of discrimination. Since the passage of the Act in 2007, there has only been one full prosecution for the crime of slavery. In that case the slave owner received a lenient sentence and was released on bail a few months after he was convicted, pending an appeal. He has remained at liberty since, even though the appeal remains unresolved. Moreover, the mother of the 9- and 11-year-old victims, herself a slave, was also convicted in the proceeding.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Act No. 2013-011 of 23 January 2013 designated slavery and torture as crimes against humanity, reinforcing their status under international law. In other measures to overcome its slavery reputation, in March 2013 the government established the National Agency for the Fight against the Consequences of Slavery, for Reintegration and for the Fight against Poverty (Agence Nationale de Lutte contre les Séquelles de l’Esclavage, de l’Insertion et de Lutte contre la Pauvreté), known as Tadamoun. Its mandate includes implementing anti-poverty activities, land restitution programmes and carrying out projects to combat the influences of generations of slavery. It is also empowered to lodge complaints against alleged perpetrators of slavery-like practices on behalf of victims, though this capacity does not seem to have actually been exercised as of this writing. UN sources have reported that to date there is little information available on the performance of this agency.<sup>24</sup> For their part, NGOs continue to press for the ability to bring complaints themselves on behalf of victims.<sup>25</sup>

Following the 2009 visit to Mauritania of the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) helped the Government of Mauritania draw up a road map for the implementation of her recommendations for combating slavery. In February 2014 the Special Rapporteur carried out a follow-up visit. She found that the authorities ‘had made good progress in taking legislative and institutional measures aimed at fighting forms of slavery in Mauritania’.<sup>26</sup> In March 2014 the government formally adopted the road map; measures adopted included setting up a dedicated tribunal for cases of slavery, a move which was intended to make justice more accessible and effective for victims.<sup>27</sup> It is still too early to assess the road map’s impact. NGOs involved in the fight against slavery and racism point out that the road map does not recognize the important role of civil society organizations in challenging and changing the status quo, and that it places all elements of the process in the government’s control, despite the role of the authorities in shoring up and maintaining the practice of slavery over

past decades. These misgivings are particularly pertinent in light of reports in December 2014 that the serving government Minister for Social Affairs concerning Children and the Family had been denounced as holding slaves in her own household.<sup>28</sup>

This range of programmes and measures, however, has not eradicated slavery or discrimination against Haratines. Former slaves and their advocates continue to come under pressure as they try to ensure that the law is enforced. In one example, anti-slavery campaigner Biram Dah Abeid, who came second in Mauritania's presidential election in

June with 8.9 per cent of the vote, was arrested in November 2014 with at least eight other activists, including members of his organization, the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement.<sup>29</sup> The arrests took place in the context of a peaceful campaign against slavery and in favour of agrarian reform. Though others were reportedly released, the Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste (IRA) members reportedly remained in detention as of the end of the year, and grave concerns have been expressed about their access to due process.

# Current situation of Haratine women

What of the particular situation of Haratine women? As described above, some Haratine remain enslaved despite the criminalization of the practice of slavery, though their numbers are difficult to establish and they are virtually impossible for outsiders to reach. Other women, newly emerged from slavery, are in need of particular and focused support to overcome the harm slavery has caused them and to learn how to manage on their own. Finally, the most accessible group of Haratine women are those who, though descended from slaves, have been born into freedom. Even among this group, however, the slavery of their grandparents and earlier ancestors continues to cast a long shadow.

There are many issues which affect all Haratine women, whether they are slaves or free. The information below is presented in the following format: first, issues affecting Haratine women who are still slaves, of which there remain many in Mauritania. The second section covers matters of concern particularly to newly freed Haratine women, that is, those who have obtained their freedom in the last five years or so and are struggling to cope with life challenges for which they were not remotely prepared or equipped by their former masters. Finally, the report addresses the situation of freeborn Haratine women, in particular the multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization that they continue to face, despite generations of freedom from enslavement. The report gives information on Haratine women's experience of a series of human rights to which they are entitled under international covenants signed and ratified by Mauritania.

## The situation of Haratine women still in slavery

This section looks first at the situation of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable: Haratine women still enslaved by White Moor masters. It draws on a number of materials, including the field interviews and baseline study described above in the methodology section, as well as reports from international and domestic sources. As in subsequent sections on newly freed and freeborn Haratine women, the focus is on the woman's position within society and within the family.

Within Mauritania's largely agricultural and pastoral society, Haratine slaves are relied upon to perform a range of types of work, including childcare, cooking, fuel

gathering and tending livestock, for long hours and typically without pay. This life of hard labour denies Haratine slaves any form of education or training, limiting their ability to survive outside the boundaries of the master–slave relationship and perpetuating their feelings of dependency. Haratine women, in particular, are abused by their masters at multiple levels. As described by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, 'they suffer triple discrimination: firstly as women, secondly as mothers and thirdly as slaves.'<sup>30</sup>

The interviewees described in stark terms their situation as slaves. According to one woman:

*'I lived as a slave for much of my youth. It's a bad situation, because the masters use you. You have no point of view, so you do everything without thinking, as long as it is the will of the master ... Also, they told us it was part of the religion ... How could you fight it, where to start? ... You feel totally powerless.'*

Several of the women described in depth the discrimination they felt as slaves in Mauritanian society. One woman, when asked about her experience of discrimination, answered simply, 'No, I don't know, I never learned anything.' When asked whether she felt Haratine women are treated differently from other women in Mauritania, and if so, how this was felt, she said, 'just for the colour of the skin. The *bidaniyates* [White Moorish women] are seated in the shade, and the *Haratinyates* work.' Other respondents echoed this with accounts of widespread discrimination:

*'For us women, well, we are women and also objects for men. We are discriminated against as slaves, and as women.'*

## Rape and sexual servitude

Rape and sexual abuse are a core characteristic of slavery, allowing masters both sexual and reproductive control over their slaves. The master controls the woman's body, both for labour and for sexual availability; and he controls her reproductive capacity to produce more labour. This is why women's experience of slavery differs so much from men's: because any children that women bear also become the property of their masters, women are an important

resource for the production of new slaves. Retaining women in the domestic sphere (rather than out working in fields or herding animals far away, as men often do) serves a double function. It restricts their movements and social interactions, thus helping prevent escape; and it ensures that masters have fuller control over them. The descriptions of rape and sexual abuse were harrowing, with only one of the five newly emancipated women reporting not having been subjected to regular sexual abuse. Three of them reported bearing the master's children.

*'Yes, I was always like a goat in his herd. I had a child with him but he never recognized it. He always told me that I was his sister's slave.'*

*'Two of my children are not my husband's, but my old master's. We never asked questions.'*

*'Yes, it was inevitable, because the master commanded it. We couldn't do anything.'*

## Threats and abuse: complicity of security forces

Besides carrying out physical abuse and ill-treatment against the slaves themselves, masters further subjugated their slaves by threatening to direct state power against them. Slaves were told that if they tried to escape the masters, the police would arrest and ill-treat or torture

### 'Powerless before our master' – daily life as a slave in Mauritania

One of the interviewees vividly described the reality of being a hereditary slave:

*'We had no choice, as we were born to slave parents, we were slaves through them. For a long time they made us believe that we were created to live as slaves. That was the religion.'*

According to her testimony, in the household where she lived, the master exerted absolute physical control over his slaves, backed up with the threat of state power:

*'My family and I lived like animals, because they used us like objects ... The members of the master's family did whatever they wanted with us. They made us have sexual relations with them however they wanted; when we resisted, we were beaten and tied up.'*

She described how the master threatened them with arrest by the police if they resisted or tried to flee. Furthermore, to bolster these threats, the master used religion to underpin his authority, making it virtually impossible at first for her and her family to offer any moral resistance:

*'We truly believed it was the will of Allah and his prophet Muhammad. You can't oppose religion. But, when our parents died, my brother started to doubt, because the ill-treatment we suffered was not in the Koran.'*

This interviewee spoke eloquently about the psychological impact of the abuse she suffered.

*'During our enslavement, we were mistreated, we girls were raped every day. We had no choice, we were powerless before our master. The slightest resistance was punished severely, and that traumatized us. You start to accept the situation as it is ... For women it is more complicated [than for Haratine men] because naturally women are more weak and vulnerable. Men have more endurance, they take more of the physical strain, but women also undergo psychological strain on top of the physical. Like when they made me have sexual relations against my will, and I couldn't say no... I was like his property.'*

The physical, sexual and psychological abuse had tangible results, especially when she fell pregnant:

*'You see that little boy there? He is the son of my old master. In fact, most of us women who were slaves, we have done that, either for the master, or for his brothers, or sometimes for his children, when they fancied a bit of fun.'*

As discussed elsewhere, when a slave woman bears children – particularly if they are his children – the master is exerting another form of control. This exploitation of a woman's reproductive ability to increase his own wealth is another way of exercising his absolute domination and power over even the most intimate aspects of her life. The master's control permeates all of her relationships, even the ones she has with her children, as in Mauritania's system of hereditary slavery they are born her master's property. Bearing children increases the slave woman's dependence and further ties her to the master's household, hampering even more her ability to run away or to resist.

them. The security forces were complicit in this, at times apprehending escaped slaves and handing them back to their masters. Three of the women interviewed reported instances of ill-treatment or threats of arrest by the police or security forces if they tried to run away.

*‘The local associations helped me get free from the family that was exploiting me in every way. They used to tell me that if I left, they would hand me over to the police ... I really wanted to run away but I was afraid of my master, who was always threatening me with the police or the guards.’*

*‘I always wanted to leave, up until my husband arrived. He helped me to get out and free myself from the family who exploited me in every way ... I stood it for a long time, even though they would beat me and tie me up so that I couldn’t run away ... I’d wanted to escape for a long time, but I was afraid of my master, who beat me and tied me up like a goat.’*

*‘Life as slaves affected us a lot. We don’t belong to ourselves. We can’t think for ourselves ... They used to tell us that that was Allah’s will for our lives ... My husband tried once to run away, but he was caught by the police and punished very severely by the master. Our work in the fields and the house was made even harder. That frightened us, and the master controlled us through our fear of the guards and the police.’*

Not surprisingly in this context, interviewees described a feeling of betrayal and abandonment by the authorities. One woman said simply of her treatment by authorities, ‘We are considered sub-human.’ Another reported being disturbed by the fact that ‘There are still a lot of people who are slaves, and this is seen as normal by the decision-makers.’ The tradition of official complicity in the practice of slavery has serious ramifications. Haratines distrust the authorities with good reason. Despite the legislative framework prohibiting slavery, and the multiplication of agencies intended to end slavery and deal with its aftermath, the practice continues in Mauritania today, enabled by widespread impunity.

### **Enforced separation and denial of the right to a family life**

Slavery permeates every aspect of its victim’s life, even with regard to her own roles as wife and mother. Each of the interviews revealed different ways in which slavery undermines and harms family life. This is immensely significant, given the fundamental role families have played in helping some freeborn women cope with the

challenges in their lives. In the cases of two of the women who have been abandoned by their husbands, parents or brothers give them much-needed material support. In another case, the woman’s parents pay for her children’s education.

In some instances, masters break up nuclear families, separating parents from children and siblings from each other. This approach is often used as a mechanism of control over the slave mother and also serves to reinforce the dependency of slave children, who grow up with no support network beyond their service to their master: in the words of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, ‘their masters, as social relatives, become the closest thing to family’.<sup>31</sup>

Slavery also has a corrosive influence on marriages. Even when a slave is married, masters continue to exert a strong degree of control over their personal affairs and may enforce divorce or separation if the relationship is perceived to undermine their authority. Nor does the master’s sexual predation necessarily end when a female slave marries. He can continue to subject her to sexual servitude and even to father children on her, regardless of the pain and harm this may cause within her marriage.

*‘Discrimination is part of our lives. In our master’s house, we were considered objects, to be used as they wanted. Women are objects of pleasure for the masters. This is traumatizing, above all, for our husbands, who can’t do anything.’*

## **The situation of Haratine women newly emerged from slavery**

Though slavery involves extraordinary levels of control and exploitation, the formal release of a victim from servitude may not necessarily represent the end of their abuse by the master and his family. The entrenched power of the relationship and the lack of livelihood opportunities for newly freed Haratine women can result in some former slaves sliding back into slavery-like situations following emancipation:

*‘Descendants of slaves are looked down upon. Slave owners are the rich people of this country. We flee their houses, but when we need work, we go back to them under another form. They make us work like slaves again.’*

Even former slaves who have been nominally freed may continue to serve their old masters, or enter into slavery-like servitude with new ones, as they do not see

any viable alternative livelihood.<sup>32</sup> The continuum between formal slavery and the continued exploitation of many Haratine women, even after they have been freed, means that, in practice, anti-slavery efforts must not only focus on the crucial issue of abolition but also address the continued marginalization former slaves face in Mauritanian society. To secure full emancipation for Mauritania's Haratine women, it is therefore necessary to establish a clear and comprehensive system of support to ensure that former slaves are able to create meaningful new lives for themselves. Some of the major issues confronting this group are discussed in this section.

## Identity documents

Identity documents are highly important in Mauritania, not least for acquiring nationality under domestic law. Former slaves generally do not have them; for many this is due at least in part to the circumstances around their birth: marriages between slaves are often unrecognized by their masters and many slaves grow up without knowing their father.<sup>33</sup> The lack of birth documentation poses serious problems for many people, including a large number of Haratines. For example, the census process begun in 2011 was particularly problematic for Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities, not least because it required the individual to produce identity documents from the two previous generations. In Mauritania birth documentation is only issued when parents can supply a valid marriage certificate.<sup>34</sup>

These requirements are often insurmountable for illiterate and impoverished hereditary slaves living under the control of slave masters, many of them in remote areas with limited public services. The resulting lack of documentation and potentially stateless status makes the vulnerability of these individuals all the more acute, affecting not just their access to education but also their right to freedom of movement, their ability to vote and their employability in the formal economy.

The interviews revealed that freeborn Haratine women generally possessed identity documents, though in one case, where the couple were divorced, the husband was denying the wife access to her papers. Among the five newly emancipated women, however, the situation was very different. Two of them had no identity documents at all, though they reported being in the process of obtaining them with NGO support. The other three women had obtained their papers, but expressed great concern because their children did not have them.

## Employment and livelihoods

In spite of the drive, autonomy and courage demonstrated by many emancipated Haratine women, the barriers they face even after securing their freedom can be insurmountable. Excluded from basic services and livelihood opportunities, they often struggle to access adequately paid employment due to continued social stigmatization. In some cases, freed Haratine women have reportedly ended up working for relatives of their former masters or engaging in prostitution to survive.<sup>36</sup>

### Identity documents and children's access to education

When available, education and training have been taken up by emancipated Haratine and their descendants with enthusiasm. Newly emancipated mothers viewed these opportunities as an important bridge for their children to improve their post-slavery circumstances.

*'Now that I am no longer under a master, I have hope that my children can study. We need help to fight against slavery – it kills future generations.'*

*'What comforts me is that I am free, and my child is learning to read.'*

Nevertheless, many of these children's access to education is hampered by the lack of identity documents and inadequate resources. Although education has been compulsory for children up to the age of 14 since 2001,

many children of former slaves and others whose birth was not registered are not in school. In Nouakchott, for example, the mayor reportedly informed the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism that 80 per cent of children from Haratine communities were not in school, a situation that clearly hampers the life possibilities and prospects of the entire ethnic group.<sup>35</sup> Given these constraints, the tenuous nature of the lifeline represented by education was described clearly by another newly emancipated interviewee:

*'My children don't go to school due to lack of resources. How can I get the children into school without money? They have to pay for books ... It is hard, no one helps us to get out of this situation ... [What gives me] hope for the future? What future? ... The children don't study. We are poor, without hope.'*

The newly emancipated women interviewed for this study all described the difficulties they faced as Haratines and former slaves in supporting themselves and their children. They report that there are no governmental support mechanisms and that, aside from two respondents who received small amounts of monetary aid from communal authorities, they scrape by with menial work as cleaners or market sellers, and by relying on assistance from NGOs. Though eager to rebuild their lives, their lack of education or training meant that they were only able to access low-skilled, poorly paid employment.

*‘I have no skills or resources.’*

*‘We have no way of integrating like other people. I sell pastries to meet my children’s needs. I can’t find paid work because I have neither skills nor money. I tried to sell fabric but it is difficult as I have no capital.’*

*‘I lived my whole life under slavery, with my brothers and sisters ... [Now] I work as a cleaner. Life is very hard. I do laundry for other families to help make ends meet.’*

*‘I am a Haratine woman who was freed five years ago. I spent my whole girlhood as a slave. Life is hard, because there is no structure to help former slaves integrate into ordinary life. To get by, I started off begging; then, a benefactor gave me a little money and I started selling fish in the market. I am married to a former slave who does odd jobs, and life continues. At my age, I am still learning how to think for myself without needing a master to tell me what I have to do. I have a hard time finding money to buy my fish, I can’t even meet our basic needs.’*

## Access to justice: proceedings against former owners

As described above, slavery has been criminalized since 2007 and legal mechanisms do exist for bringing slave owners to justice. Nevertheless, there has been only one full prosecution of a slave owner for the crime of slavery. For illiterate, destitute former slaves, the lodging of formal criminal charges against their former masters is an enormous challenge; for many, the mere struggle to survive occupies all of their time and energy. This may be one explanation as to why the issue of justice was not mentioned once in the five interviews with former slaves. Another may well be that Mauritania’s system of hereditary slavery entails a high degree of indoctrination of its victims, conditioning them to accept their lot as ‘possessions’ and making it exceedingly difficult for them to formally accuse their masters.

Mauritania’s National Human Rights Commission (Commission Nationale des Droits de l’Homme de la République Islamique de Mauritanie) reported in September 2014 that at least 26 legal cases of alleged slavery had been brought before the courts, with others pending. It has recommended a number of amendments to the 2007 Act to make it more accessible, such as allowing NGOs to be civil parties to victims’ cases, helping them to lodge complaints.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has pointed out larger issues around women’s access to justice. It highlighted the absence of meaningful access to justice for female victims of violence and other offences, as well as the inadequate training of legal practitioners in gender-specific issues.<sup>38</sup>

## Separation from family members

*What keeps you awake and worried at night?*

*‘It’s the fact of not knowing my mother, and the fact of not knowing where my sister is.’*

As evidenced by the interviews, the practice of slavery wreaks havoc on the institution of the family. A crucial and sensitive issue is that many Haratine may hesitate to seek emancipation or are sent elsewhere by their masters, meaning family members are unable to track them down.<sup>39</sup> In the interviews for this report, it was clear that this causes considerable damage even to those who are newly emancipated. Of the five such women interviewed, four reported having family members who were still enslaved. One reported that her younger brothers had been sent away by the master to work at an unknown location. ‘The slavers’, she said, ‘have begun to carry out their acts in secret, because of the accusations against them by the associations.’ The three remaining women all reported that their family members were reluctant to leave their masters, judging that they were better off enslaved than free.

*‘They are all still slaves, no one wants to leave their master. They hide when you try to go help them.’*

*‘They refuse to leave, because they think that our situation is no better than theirs.’*

This attitude was clearly disturbing to the interviewees. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as a result of the closed nature of the relationship between masters and slaves, in which the social and human relationships that develop between the two groups can be used to perpetuate the system: the baseline study indicated, for example, that some consider slaves and



owners themselves to be *frères de lait*, or ‘milk brothers’, children breastfed by the same woman. These social relations with former masters can still exist even among younger Haratines who no longer self-identify as slaves, though the latter have the space to decline to perform services that the Beydan request ‘fraternally’, without fear of consequences.

On the other hand, however, their attitude can be seen as an indication of the depth of the system’s roots and its closed nature, which cuts slaves off from education, denies them the opportunity to develop the full range of life skills and isolates them from other ways of life. The decision of family members to remain enslaved has ramifications for the freed slaves as well, cutting them off from contact with their loved ones and depriving them of the social, financial and emotional support that extended family has offered some of the other interviewees at times of need.

## The situation of freeborn Haratine women

### Poverty and discrimination

Though poverty cuts across all ethnicities in Mauritania, Haratines are overall the most economically marginalized group. Poverty, the struggle to feed their children and, if at all possible, to pay for their schooling were themes that ran through nearly all of the women’s interviews. Despite the clear need for targeted assistance to Haratines, concern has been expressed about the apparent absence of anti-poverty projects specifically targeting Haratines. Instead, they have reportedly been only indirect beneficiaries of projects addressing generalized poverty.<sup>40</sup>

Though many Haratine women invest remarkable effort and determination to improve their situation, overcoming Mauritania’s entrenched discrimination is difficult. One reported:

*‘I think it [discrimination] is getting worse, because we are getting poorer and poorer, and no one bothers to try to help us solve our problem. I am a woman living alone in a small room, I have nothing. They ask me for collateral for a loan for my small business: where am I going to find that? I think that the state should be our guarantor with the banks ... if I don’t find any money to support my small business, my children can’t go to school, they’ll end up as poor as I am, and so it will continue.’*

Another woman, the mother of six girls and one boy, supported her children and her ailing mother after the death of her first husband by using her small amount of

savings to set up as a fish vendor. She reported being unable to sleep at night out of worry over where the next day’s food was coming from. Two years ago she remarried; her new husband is a day worker and often cannot find work:

*‘Sometimes, I feel such weakness and worry that I nearly lose the courage to carry on with life as normal ... what keeps me from sleeping is remembering the night my youngest daughter kept me up from hunger, because I had nothing to give her to eat. All I want is to see my children grow up and live without having to go through the bitterness that I did.’*

The women’s accounts made it clear that poverty was closely linked to women’s experience of discrimination, which all of the interviewees reported suffering. One interviewee reported that:

*‘In the NGOs we talk about the rights of women. But Haratine women are very much discriminated against – they are considered worthless. They have no schooling, they live in poverty. This situation is so hard, and we can do nothing about it. With the NGOs, we think that people will change their mentality ... But for me, my family has been free for a long time, yet our circumstances haven’t really changed, even though we now have our liberty.’*

The account above was typical, and demonstrated how, for freeborn women, the discrimination they felt was not diminished by freedom or the passage of generations since the end of their families’ enslavement; they felt they were still perceived as slaves.

*‘Haratine women are despised. Coming from slavery, the White Moors consider us objects without any value. When you go to them looking for work, they make you work like a slave because that’s how they see you. Then they pay you very little, and as you have no choice you don’t know what to do about it. Just for the colour of our skin, we are identified as slaves.’*

However, the women were aware of discrimination not only by other communities, but also within their own community and families:

*‘I feel that women don’t have the right to speak to express their feelings. As a Haratine woman, I suffer a double discrimination. As descendants of slaves, our neighbours despise us ... My husband (my ex-husband, I mean) doesn’t recognize my right to speak.’*

Some of those interviewed spoke as well of the dangers, particularly for young people, of internalizing discrimination in feelings of low self-worth:

*‘I am a haratanyate born into a family of former slaves. I go to university. My dad is a driver in Nouakchott, which allows us to get by, albeit with difficulty. I work part-time in a restaurant to help out. Starting normal life again after decades of slavery is not easy. The consequences of slavery – ignorance, poverty, social and economic marginalization, the lack of a future – weigh tremendously on us ... the stigma is so great that some of my younger friends are ashamed to be part of this community.’*

In this way, discrimination directed against Haratine women by members of other ethnic groups in Mauritania due to their ethnicity, and by members of their own families due to their gender, has the pernicious effect of undermining their own feelings of self-worth and belonging.

## Haratine girls and access to education

The report earlier included a discussion of the links between identity documents and education among newly freed slaves (p. 13). Issues around education, however, are extremely significant among the freeborn Haratine population as well. The Haratine Manifesto published in April 2013 indicated that Haratines represent 85 per cent of the total illiterate population in Mauritania; that more than 80 per cent of Haratine have not completed primary education; and that Haratine students constitute only 5 per cent of the students who are enrolled in higher education.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, the baseline study indicated that education among the Haratine population is minimal; for most Haratines, the lack of any formal education presented the greatest obstacle to their main wish for the future – to have formal employment allowing them to live with dignity and meet their needs and those of their children. Desired professions that were considered beyond them due to their lack of qualifications included nursing, the army, engine mechanics and trade.

Although primary education is compulsory by law for all children under the age of 15, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reported in July 2014 that women in Mauritania were much more likely than men to be illiterate (53 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively), with non-Arab and rural girls at particular risk of being excluded from the education system.<sup>42</sup> The women interviewed described in particular how discriminatory attitudes within the family made access to schooling more difficult for girls. One said,

‘Haratines live in such poverty ... girls are not meant to go to school for long, as they are supposed to be getting married anyway.’ Another went further:

*‘For us, discrimination begins in the family. Custom, and a poor interpretation of Islam, makes the lives of Haratine women miserable. Boys are treated differently from girls – girls are raised to serve their husbands, and nothing more. Parents will work really hard to send boys to school, but when a girl drops out of school no one cares.’*

This valuable input from the women interviewed highlights again that efforts to address issues such as girls’ access to education cannot focus solely on a top-down approach around identity documentation and infrastructure, as important as these areas are. They also need to incorporate work at a grassroots level to promote attitudinal shifts within Haratine families and communities, stressing the value of girls’ education for their own and their families’ futures.

## Access to land

Land emerged as an important issue in both the baseline study and the in-depth interviews. While slaves own nothing, even freeborn Haratines are often excluded from land ownership. During her 2010 visit to Mauritania the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery reported finding that some former slaves in rural areas are unable to gain land titles, and are forced to give a percentage of what they produce to their former owners – meaning their dependency on their master may continue, sometimes in conditions in serfdom.<sup>43</sup> While the government has implemented a limited programme of assistance in the form of land, these are not accessible to many former slaves or descendants of slaves.<sup>44</sup> As the interviews demonstrate, in many areas and for many families the problem persists. One woman highlighted how the requirement for ancestral identity documents obstructs Haratines from gaining ownership of land:

*‘We all have our identity documents [in the family], but sometimes we are asked for our grandparents’ documents in order to access certain rights. Without those, we get nothing. For example, a while ago they were distributing plots of land to destitute families, but we did not get one because we did not have our grandparents’ papers.’*

Women face particular obstacles to land ownership: the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has noted with concern that women in Mauritania

cannot legally buy or transfer land without authorization by a third party, such as a guardian or male family member.<sup>45</sup> Discriminatory treatment also plays a role. One woman described how she migrated to the capital Nouakchott, moving to a neighbourhood of unallocated land. The census-taking committee registered her on a plot, but her ownership was later contested by another woman.

*‘I have all the documents proving that it is my land but the other woman had more influence than I and the authorities found in her favour. I am still seeking justice as I feel marginalized, like they are taking something away that is mine by right ... I pray to Allah that this social vision, where some are deprived of their rights, will change.’*

The significance of the issue of land access is highlighted by a recent NGO campaign by anti-slavery activists around agrarian reform, during which members of the IRA were arrested. As of January 2015, they remain in detention.

## Livelihoods and employment

In Mauritania, most low-skilled and poorly paid employment is undertaken by Haratines, who at the same time are largely sidelined from professional positions in government or business. NGOs report that more than 90 per cent of the dockers, domestic workers and labourers performing unskilled and low-paid jobs in the country are Haratines, as compared to only 2 per cent of high-ranking civil servants and senior executives in the public and private sectors. Meanwhile, although Haratines make up

the greater part of the lower levels of the country’s military and police, Haratines are largely excluded from middle- and higher-level positions within these institutions. The 2013 Haratine Manifesto indicated that fewer than 10 of the over 200 magistrates practising in Mauritania were Haratine.<sup>46</sup>

The interviews with Haratine women revealed how closely discrimination is tied to issues around work, and the degree to which it is perceived to have affected their community’s work opportunities.

*‘There are types of field work that are only done by Haratines ... like at harvest time.’*

*‘Domestic servants ... these types of jobs are only done by Haratines. It’s as though it’s linked to our social status. It’s very frustrating.’*

With regard to gender differences, in the interviews three freeborn Haratine women drew attention to particular constraints they felt due to their gender, reporting that Haratine men are free to migrate in search of work but women cannot. Women are more tied to the home by tradition and by domestic and childcare responsibilities, limiting their employment options. It is more socially acceptable, however, for men to leave the home in search of work, widening their choices and possibly allowing for greater income. There is a flip side, however: the potentially detrimental effect of men’s migration on Haratine families is discussed more fully in the section on marriage.

A number of women reported working as domestic servants. The Committee on the Elimination of

## Discrimination in employment

Despite their disproportionate concentration in low-status or poorly paid employment, the respondents for this report included several professional Haratine women.

Their descriptions of discrimination were illuminating, and illustrated that professional status is no protection against it. One woman, a civil servant, described how for girls the experience of discrimination begins within their own families, as parents, following tradition and a mistaken interpretation of Islam, prioritize the education of their sons while teaching their daughters nothing more than how to be good wives to their husbands.

Though at the time of the interview she had been a civil servant for 18 years, she described the glass ceiling

that she has witnessed and experienced as a woman in her workplace:

*‘In the workplace, women are not considered equals. Even some professional women are treated like flowers, there to make the office look nice, with none of the decision-making ability that their male colleagues have.’*

The fact of being Haratine resulted in additional discrimination, she reported:

*‘In so many years, I have not had a single promotion. My colleagues come and are promoted above me, year after year. I think this is due to my belonging to a supposed slave caste. It’s a social injustice.’*

Discrimination against Women has expressed concern at the 'precarious labour conditions' of rural women, especially Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians, who 'lack any type of social protection for themselves and their families'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, some forms of domestic servitude are considered under international norms to be a contemporary form of slavery. Despite the passage in August 2011 of a law regarding domestic workers in private households which outlined the rights and duties of both employer and employee, Haratine women in domestic service are at risk of *de facto* enslavement.

Micro-credit was also mentioned in the study and interviews, as this is one of the programmatic areas by which the state is attempting to address poverty, giving particular priority to women.<sup>48</sup> The baseline study indicated that Haratines are largely excluded from access to credit, a point echoed by one interviewee:

'[I could improve my situation] *if I can find funding to improve my small business. It's really for my children that I would like to do this, because my chances at a good job are minimal due to my lack of schooling ... Sometimes as fabric vendors in the market, we need a bit of credit to expand our stock. But that is impossible, because they need a guarantee, like a plot of land or other valuable property that we just don't have. Groups of Haratine women rarely get credit, because lenders don't trust us.*'

Again, this seems to be an area where top-down programming is insufficient on its own to deliver real and substantive change to Haratine women. What is required, for it to actually make a difference, is work at the grassroots level to address issues around discrimination and trust, so that funds are actually allocated equitably and where they can have the greatest effect.

## The right to political participation

Political exclusion remains a major issue for Haratines. In 2013, for example, it was estimated that they held only 5 out of 95 seats in the National Assembly, while only 1 of the 56 senators was a Haratine. This lack of representation was evident at a regional level as well, with only 2 out of 13 governors and 3 of 53 prefects identified as Haratine.<sup>49</sup> With regard to the political process, the baseline study indicated that Haratines, as a block, tend to support candidates who are sensitive to their condition as a vulnerable minority. Some of the women interviewed spoke about lack of trust in the authorities on the one hand, and the need for awareness raising around rights on the other; however none of them articulated support for a particular political project.

Haratines are largely excluded from the political process and mainstream political parties. In January 2014, anti-slavery campaigner Biram Dah Abeid, president of the aforementioned IRA and representative to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, announced that he would run as an independent candidate in the June presidential elections in order to highlight ongoing social injustices. He came second in the race, which was boycotted by the main opposition parties. As of January 2015, he remains in detention since his arrest in November 2014.

## Vulnerability to sexual and other violence

Although sexual and other forms of violence seem largely taboo subjects, several freeborn Haratine women interviewed discussed their experiences of violence. One woman's account demonstrated how the prejudice of those around her compounded the harm she had suffered:

'*I was a victim at a young age ... This has had a negative impact on my self-esteem, because [in our culture] the girl is seen as bearing the sole responsibility. People told me I had shamed the family. I grew up like that – but as the years have gone by, I've gotten over it. I'm doing well.*'

The context in which Haratine women live is not propitious to either protecting women or prosecuting offenders. According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, while Mauritania's Criminal Code criminalizes rape, it does not define the offence or describe the behaviour to be prohibited, seriously hampering the effectiveness of the provision against rape. As in the quote above, women or girls who are victims of rape are often stigmatized; in cases of pregnancy following rape, victims have even been prosecuted for adultery or sexual immorality (*zina*) due to a mistaken assertion that women cannot fall pregnant without their consent.<sup>50</sup> In other cases, however, families are supportive of victims.

## The situation of Haratine women in marriage

Mauritania's Personal Status Code officially gives the husband exclusive authority in family-related matters under article 56.<sup>51</sup> This lack of equality between men and women in marriage was evidenced in the interviews. When asked whether Haratine men have a different experience in Mauritania than Haratine women, the responses raised a whole host of issues. Some women observed that men who have been oppressed can tend to

## Case study: the threat of sexual violence

Discrimination, the effects of a history of sexual violence against Haratine women within the institution of slavery and the persistence of slavery and slavery-like practices make Haratine women particularly vulnerable to sexual violence within Mauritanian society. This can manifest itself in the home, as described elsewhere, but it also leaves them at greater risk in public.

In one such instance, an unmarried university graduate, also a freeborn Haratine, was attacked and raped by strangers while trying to visit a relative in hospital. She had caught a taxi early in the morning, with a man and a woman inside in addition to the taxi driver. The driver dropped off the first woman, but instead of

taking her on to the hospital he drove her to a deserted beach where he and the other man assaulted and left her. A passer-by took her to the police station, and from there she was taken to hospital. Both men were eventually arrested by police.

The interviewee described the support she received from a local NGO in dealing with the trauma caused by the incident, and says that she prays for the strength to overcome it. She lives at home, and reports that her family are fearful every time she is late getting home. About her family's reaction to the incident, she explained, 'Some of them found it very difficult in the beginning, but [since then] they have all been with me, to support me.'

act out that oppression on those in their power – namely women. Others articulated the multiple forms of discrimination they feel in Mauritanian society, as Haratine and as women married to authoritarian husbands. They also refer to the impact of parenthood, and the ways in which, in their experience, it seems more binding on women than on men.

There is a series of other issues of concern around the institution and practice of marriage. The first of these includes forced or early marriages. The second, abandonment and divorce, demonstrates the impact of several factors, including men's migration in search of work; husbands' ability to unilaterally reject their first wives when contracting polygamous marriages; and restrictive traditional views of a woman's role in marriage.

## Domestic violence and abuse

In Mauritania, many women live with the husband's family following marriage. This situation can leave them extremely isolated and vulnerable within the marital relationship. One interviewee describes effectively being deprived of any voice or protection within the family:

*'I live with all sorts of violence from my husband and his family ... Women have no say in household affairs. My father-in-law is very authoritarian towards women. I can do nothing. This is the traditional way ... I am married to a man I did not choose; no one asked my opinion. This is violence, even if it's not like what is done to the slaves ... I am not at ease in my marriage, it feels like I am the object of an ongoing act of violence, and I can't do anything about it.'*

While most of the women were not forthcoming about domestic violence and abuse, it was implicit in many of their accounts of controlling, restrictive behaviour by their husbands within the context of unequal power relationships. One woman reported:

*'I am married to my cousin, who doesn't want to see me. He gives me nothing to eat or to wear. He always says he doesn't have any money, and he can't leave his parents. I've withstood a long time, living with my in-laws – the family of my uncle – who is very authoritarian towards women.'*

When asked directly whether she had experienced domestic or sexual violence, this interviewee denied it, telling the interviewer, 'I am not a slave.' But at the end of the interview, in response to the final question, she answered, 'I was the object of violence.'

## Forced or early marriage

As mentioned earlier in the report, forced early marriages are considered under international norms to be a contemporary form of slavery. The 2001 Personal Status Code calls for the free consent of both parties to a marriage; however, while an adult woman must give her consent, for a young girl silence can be taken as consent ('le silence de la jeune fille vaut consentement').<sup>52</sup> According to the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Mauritania's Personal Status Code allows guardians to authorize the marriage of girls under the age of 18.<sup>53</sup>

The baseline study indicated that early marriage is a significant issue among Haratines: poverty is cited as a primary reason that parents choose to arrange marriages for

their very young daughters. Another contributing factor noted in the study is the cultural reaction to rape, with some Haratine parents anxious to minimize the perceived stain of rape on their family's honour by quickly offering the victim in marriage. In the interviews, several of the women reported having been forced into early marriages by their parents. In most cases they cited tradition as the reason for their forced or early marriage and their inability to refuse it. Their accounts of their experiences indicated that forced or early marriage poses obstacles to a couple that are not easily overcome. One woman reported,

*'I work as a domestic servant to support my four children. I am married but I am the sole provider, as my husband has no work. Our situation is really dire, and our marriage has difficulties because my husband is too close to his parents. We were married without our consent – our parents chose for us, and custom has it that we marry the person our parents pick out for us.'*

## Abandonment and divorce

The research indicated that there are a number of factors that appear to contribute to abandonment and divorce among the Haratine community in Mauritania. One is the impact of migration of men in search of work. As mentioned above, Haratine families live in a context of increasing urban migration, where the effects of climate change and depletion of natural resources force former pastoralists or farmers off the land to try to find work in towns and cities in construction, trade or other areas. A degree of such migration has reportedly been common for decades, with men returning home periodically from jobs in the regional towns or cities in order to plant or harvest, but it is believed to be becoming increasingly pronounced. This phenomenon has serious ramifications, as husbands and fathers spend increasing amounts of time away from their families – in some cases abandoning them altogether. Sources indicate that divorce and abandonment rates have spiked in some communities.<sup>54</sup>

One respondent's husband left her for a period of seven years, with only phone contact between them. She was pregnant when he left, and she reported that the uncertainty of her situation affected the development of the pregnancy. Upon his return they got back together, but he left again and she has had no news of him since. She does not even know if he is still alive. She was in great psychological distress and material difficulties, supporting herself and her daughter by working as a domestic servant. She has since taken another husband and is pregnant, but her brothers and community have rejected her, calling her a 'prostitute'. She is seeking support from an NGO to help stabilize her situation.

In the case of prolonged absence, Mauritania's Personal Status Code does allow the bride to stipulate that her husband may not take another wife, or else she can have the marriage dissolved by a judge and apply for compensation.<sup>55</sup> In practice, however, it is not clear that this happens. In many cases, the husband has no further real contact with the family, and provides little or no support. The interviews bear witness to the harm and suffering this has caused some women and their children. One interviewee reported:

*'I am divorced from my husband, who rejected me. He fights a lot, and gets home very late, he has a lot of other women. He left me because I dared to express my unhappiness with his behaviour. This is not acceptable ... women must be totally submissive. His parents and our imam backed him, and I returned to my parents. He used to contribute a little bit to support the children, but he doesn't do that any more. I've decided to live alone and face the reality of life with my children.'*

Another women shared a similar story:

*'I sell fabric at the market. It's all I can do, since I didn't study much. I left school at 15 for an early marriage, but it didn't work. My husband divorced me, and my parents didn't want to take me back because of the shame to my family. Now I live alone with two children.'*

A third respondent had had seven children with her husband when he began a second family. She took her case to the courts. She reported that, after many economic and moral difficulties, and with the help of a local NGO, two years ago she and her husband reached an alimony agreement whereby he supports her and the children according to his means.

Mauritania's Personal Status Code also permits a man to engage in polygamy in certain conditions, including that the wives agree, and allows for wives to be repudiated and marriages to be dissolved at the will of the husband only.<sup>56</sup> A number of activist women were divorced by their husbands because they refused to conform to the submissive role consigned to them by tradition. One woman, who has worked for years in a pro-Haratine NGO, was abandoned by her husband because he considered her work to be against his religious belief. She described the situation in Mauritania in stark terms:

*'Ignorance and economic marginalization are systematically encouraged by our political and religious authorities, with grave consequences: the bulk of*

*Haratine women are reduced to carrying out all the most menial work themselves. That's how I decided to join the efforts of some others, to help raise women's awareness ... Some people are not thrilled by this.'*

A second woman echoed this experience:

*'I work within civil society, for an NGO that raises awareness and tries to change people's mindsets about vulnerable groups such as the illiterate, and those who*

*do not know how to demand their rights. I do this to serve my country ... More than once, I have been divorced because of my work. We are a society in which customs and traditions place limits on a woman's freedom.'*

These cases highlight the vulnerability of courageous women who are working to improve their own situations and those of their wider community in the face of repressive societal values.

### Case study: the experience of abandonment

One pregnant woman reported that she and her two sons have been abandoned by her husband. He was her cousin and was chosen for her by her parents: as she put it, 'I couldn't refuse their choice.' She said, 'I withstood the conditions I was living in for a long time, but when it came to him [her husband] taking a second wife, and giving nothing to support our children, well ...'

Since taking a second wife, her husband gives her nothing to eat or to wear, and contributes nothing for the maintenance of their children. To survive she works as a

domestic servant for some White Moors, whom she describes as being kind to her; her brothers also help her when they can. She reports that Haratine men have a better time of things because at least they can leave home to look for work, an option that is not available to her. She struggles to make ends meet, not least because her pregnancy has made her feel ill and hindered her ability to work, and because, although she has identity documents, they are in her husband's possession and he has refused to give them to her. She has sought help from a supportive NGO.

# Drivers and aspects of marginalization

While the life stories of many Haratine women in Mauritania, including respondents for this report, reflect extraordinary courage and determination, the obstacles to their full enjoyment of a range of human rights are nevertheless considerable. A number of key issues are evident in the perpetuation of abuses and discrimination, reflected in the testimonies gathered here. While the dynamics of this marginalization are complex and multi-layered, some of the main drivers are summarized here.

## Haratine women as individuals

**The lack of education and opportunities is self-perpetuating and crippling.** Under the institution of slavery, masters deny their slaves any kind of education, training in life skills or preparation for survival in the wider world. Despite this being the direct result of their abuse and exploitation by their former owners, this can be a source of shame for newly emancipated slaves. As Haratines are subjected to prejudice and discriminated against by other groups in Mauritania, this feeling of shame seems to persist even generations after a Haratine family has escaped slavery. Freeborn Haratines are denied equal access to education and livelihoods; their resulting poverty feeds the prejudice that they are intrinsically inferior and unable to change.

**Haratine women, particularly those who are newly emancipated, are objectified by their masters and others in authority.** They described being viewed or treated as ‘property’, ‘objects of no value’, ‘worthless’, ‘animals’, ‘objects of pleasure’, ‘sub-human’. This is linked to the common practice of slave-owning elites of depriving women of control over their own lives and their lack of choice.

## Haratine women in the family

**Within the institution of slavery, masters deliberately take steps to weaken the institution of the family.** They break up nuclear families, separating parents from children and siblings from each other, and devastate Haratine marriages by perpetrating rape and sexual servitude against Haratine wives. This denies them the protection and support that a strong family bond can give freeborn Haratines in the face of difficulties.

**The oppression suffered by Haratine men, slave or free, is often passed on in their relationships with Haratine women.** In this way, Haratine women face double discrimination; they are mistreated on the basis of being Haratine, and again on the basis of being female. Some observers have indicated that women’s concerns are marginalized within the larger anti-racism movement in Mauritania; for example, the April 2013 Haratine Manifesto mentioned elsewhere in this report, while mentioning gender issues generally, makes no reference to the specific experiences of Haratine women.

**When husbands have the ability to unilaterally repudiate their wives and dissolve their marriages, including in order to take second wives, the first wives and their children frequently suffer.** According to the women interviewed, in these circumstances the man spends more of his time and more of his income on his second family, to the detriment of the welfare of the first.

**Haratine families are particularly vulnerable to wider societal pressures, such as increased urban migration, which destabilize their already weak family bonds.** When husbands and fathers travel to urban centres to find work, the possible monetary gain to the family is outweighed by the risks to its stability. Many heads of household who leave in search of work never again take up their position in the same way.

## Haratine women in society

**Prejudice against Haratines is so deep that the fact of being freeborn, or of being newly emancipated, makes little or no difference to the perception of Haratines as slaves.** Others identify Haratines by their skin colour and peg them all as slaves to be distrusted and discounted, regardless of their actual status, past or abilities. Newly emancipated and freeborn market women are denied micro-credit for their small businesses; professional women are passed over for promotion in the civil service. The education and income differences between them are irrelevant – the discrimination they face is the same.

**Haratine women are vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse.** The impact of generations of slavery, in which



Haratine women were treated as objects and were victims of ongoing sexual predation by slave owners, not to mention the persistence of this practice today, means that, on some levels, there is an increased tolerance generally for sexual abuse against Haratines. The inadequate provisions of the Mauritanian Penal Code and, in particular, its failure to define the crime of rape, as well as the practice of accusing the victim of adultery in cases of rape-induced pregnancy, deepen this vulnerability.

**Misperceptions around religion have played an important role in enabling slavery and oppression of women in the home.** Slaves have been told that their situation was Allah's will for their lives; women have been abandoned because their work or their insistence on having a voice in their marriage were considered by their husbands not to be in accordance with their religious principles.

**Abolition of slavery is crucial; however it is only a first step to creating equality.** The issues confronting freeborn Haratine women overlap to a striking degree with those facing still-enslaved women: vulnerability to early marriage, abandonment and domestic abuse; lack of

education; extremely limited livelihood prospects; lack of trust in the authorities; and experience of discrimination. Freedom matters, but cannot on its own rectify the impact of centuries of domination.

**Lack of trust in the authorities is pervasive among Haratines.** Among former slaves, police and other officials were used as threats or punishments, and they were feared accordingly. Even most of the freeborn women had never had any contact with government officials. One woman said that the authorities see Haratines as sub-human, while other interviewees doubted whether people in power even knew that they existed.

**Land is a particularly problematic issue.** Issues around land ownership must be addressed, particularly where they concern former masters and slaves. Recent arrests of anti-slavery activists in the context of a campaign for agrarian reform are just one indication of the sensitivity of this issue. Given the pressures around the issue of land due to climate change and changes in resources, this is an area of potentially ever-increasing conflict if no mechanism is established for dealing with land disputes and ensuring more equitable distribution.

# Recommendations

## To the Government of Mauritania

### *Regarding existing legislation:*

- **Enhance implementation and compliance of anti-slavery legislation.** In particular, the 2007 anti-slavery law continues to be flouted today, despite its clear criminalization of slavery. The government has the duty to ensure that this legislation is implemented and to support advocacy efforts to this effect. This should include supporting and funding independent lawyers and civil society organizations to file suits on behalf of victims to facilitate their access to the justice system. This should also be accompanied by training at all levels of law enforcement, including police, prosecutors and judges, on key issues such as anti-slavery legislation, human rights, women's rights and other anti-discriminatory provisions.
- **Amend existing codes and laws which perpetuate gender discrimination and violence.** An immediate priority should be the annulment of provisions allowing for early marriage and the designation of all control within a marriage to the husband. Legal provisions of rape and sexual assault should also be strengthened, supported by sensitization and awareness raising about criminal responsibility.

### *Social prejudice and discrimination:*

- **Challenge popular prejudices and stereotypes of Haratines to address the social attitudes underlying their discrimination.** In partnership with civil associations, community leaders and other stakeholders, the government should carry out a nation-wide awareness campaign on the forms of modern slavery that persist in Mauritania today. Dialogue between ethnic groups is essential. Furthermore, building on the affirmation of Islamic values in the 2007 law criminalising slavery, the government should commit to regular consultations and roundtables with religious leaders to discuss how both parties can combat slavery by sending a positive message based in Islamic values against the practice.

- **Address the root causes of discrimination against Haratines.** While the effective abolition of slavery is essential to end the exploitation of Haratine women, authorities also need to resolve the wider inequalities that affect former slaves and their descendants to prevent the continuation of slavery-like conditions. This includes ensuring adequate enjoyment of basic services such as education, enforcing equal access to justice and legal support, and providing training and other livelihood opportunities. The issue of agrarian reform, including land issues between Haratines and White Moors, should also be addressed in a transparent and equitable manner.

### *Regarding existing measures and initiatives:*

- **Support civil society and oversight bodies in the implementation of anti-slavery programmes.** Though the road map against slavery represents an important step forward, progress in realizing its provisions has so far been limited. Practical mechanisms such as joint consultative bodies and complaints procedures, with adequate budgets for funding and staffing, should be put in place to ensure that civil society and Haratine communities representatives can meaningfully inform the design and development of these measures.
- **Establish and provide resources for programmes aimed at strengthening families by combating the need for urban migration.** These could include land distribution, income support, vocational training and other mechanisms to help heads of household provide for their families without having to leave them behind.
- **Enhance the design of outreach and assistance programmes to actively target vulnerable and disenfranchised Haratines.** As an important first step, authorities should undertake a nation-wide survey and assessment of the Haratine community to identify needs and priorities. In particular, support systems such as counselling, job advice centres and vocational training should be set in place for newly-freed slaves, with the involvement of recognized representatives of the Haratine community, including women. These mechanisms should also be gender sensitive, through staff training and other measures, to ensure they meet the particular needs of newly freed women and girls.



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## Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women

Mauritania is consistently ranked as the worst place in the world for slavery, with tens of thousands still trapped in total servitude across the country. This practice, despite officially being criminalized, continues to be sustained by the systematic marginalization of Mauritania's large Haratine population. The situation is especially precarious for Haratine women, who are discriminated against on account of both their gender and ethnicity.

This report, *Still Far From Freedom: The Struggle of Mauritania's Haratine Women*, draws on extensive research and first-hand testimony from Haratine women. Besides highlighting the everyday reality of abuse and oppression experienced by those in servitude – ranging from exploitative labour, intimidation and confinement to rape, violence and the enforced separation of families – it also explores how formerly enslaved Haratines and their descendants still face widespread stigmatization. The deep discrimination experienced by Haratine women, even among their own community, is driven by the reluctance of authorities to take meaningful action to curb abuses.

Nevertheless, although these obstacles can be overwhelming, many Haratine women have demonstrated great courage and determination in their fight for equality and greater autonomy in their own lives. Despite the dangers and the deep resistance their activities attract, including from male members of their own community, Haratine women have played a leading role in advocating for their rights and legal redress for the abuses committed against them. Nevertheless, though the immediate abolition of slavery in Mauritania is a critical first step in reducing many of the worst rights abuses against Haratine women, a wider process of social and institutional reform will also be required before their rights and security can be ensured.

These issues can only be addressed by a comprehensive and sustained process of social and institutional reform, with the involvement of the national government, Mauritanian civil society, law enforcement agencies and the international community.

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ISBN 978-1-907919-60-2

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