

## Social Liability and the Unbroken Chains of Slavery in Mauritania

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### ABSTRACT

Although slavery has been legally abolished in Mauritania, it remains a deeply entrenched institution in practice. This paper argues that the persistence of slavery is not due to weak enforcement or bureaucratic inefficiencies, but rather to a deliberate system of preservation rooted in caste hierarchy, cultural conditioning, and state complicity. Drawing on survivors' testimonies, expert reports, and sociological frameworks—including the concept of Social Liability—I explore how social networks that typically offer support as forms of Social Capital can instead operate as mechanisms of containment for enslaved populations. It also examines the government's dual strategy of symbolic reform and quiet suppression, revealing how international donors and political allies often enable this facade. While centered on Mauritania, the paper situates the country within a broader global continuum of modern slavery, where marginalized communities are exploited for economic gain under the guise of legality and/or tradition. The findings call for a radical reimagining of abolition—one that prioritizes structural transformation, survivor leadership, and uncompromising honesty.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Mauritania, abolition, social capital, social liability, servitude, caste.

### INTRODUCTION

In Mauritania, slavery is officially illegal, having been abolished in 1981 and criminalized in 2007. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of people continue to remain trapped in descent-based bondage, born into slavery like generations before them.

For hereditary slaves, the law is meaningless and exists only on paper. What persists in daily life is a deeply rooted system of servitude, passed from parent to child and preserved not only by tradition and silence, but by the quiet cooperation of the state. Individuals born into slave castes are often unaware that a different life is even possible, having been raised to believe that their role in society is divinely ordained and unchangeable.

The Mauritanian government, under pressure from the international community, has made surface-level gestures toward reform—passing laws, establishing special courts, and allowing limited activity by anti-slavery organizations. But these efforts often serve more to deflect criticism than to deliver justice. Despite the criminalization of slavery, only a handful of slaveholders have ever been prosecuted, with fewer than six convictions and virtually no prison time served. At the same time, activists who speak too openly about the issue face harassment, surveillance, or arrest. The topic remains taboo, not only in social spaces, but in official discourse.

This paper argues that slavery persists not due to simple bureaucratic failure or cultural inertia, but because it continues to serve the interests of those in power. It is deeply entangled with Mauritania's political, economic, and social order. Dismantling it would mean upending networks of tribal alliances, redistributing wealth and land, and empowering a marginalized majority whose silence has long been enforced. Social Liability—where kinship and community ties reinforce subjugation rather than offer protection—plays a powerful role in sustaining the system. But it operates within a broader strategy: a deliberate balancing act that preserves internally the old order while externally presenting an image of progress.

Through this lens and supported by field-based research and firsthand reports, this paper explores the structural mechanisms, both visible and hidden, that keep slavery very much alive in Mauritania. It reveals a society in which freedom is promised by law but denied by practice, and where silence is the currency of survival.

### **SLAVERY ABOLISHED IN NAME ONLY: WHY THE SYSTEM PERSISTS**

The story of slavery in Mauritania is an ancient one. For most descent-based slaves their ancestors were captured into slavery, and their families have 'belonged' to the slave-owning families ever since. Slavery status is passed down the maternal line. [1] Its roots are deep, sprawling, and ancient; having started as early as 200 AD, when Arab slave traders in the region that would later become Mauritania captured darker-skinned people from sub-Saharan Africa, forcing them to work without pay. [2]

Today in Mauritania slavery continues, camouflaged by legislation and muted by taboo. [2][5] Although the Mauritanian state has formally abolished slavery and criminalized its practice in law—albeit the last country in the world to do so—the system continues to function with disturbing continuity. (U.S. Department of State, 2023) Understanding the actual, deeply persistent reasons for this requires moving beyond surface explanations such as poor enforcement or bureaucratic failure. The persistence of slavery is not the result of human ineptitude, which might be understood or even forgiven. Rather, it reflects a calculated and enduring logic of power: the preservation of social hierarchy, economic protectionism, cultural suppression, and community complicity. [4] [5]

These forces, working in concert, help explain why abolition exists in name only. Despite criminalization, Mauritania has prosecuted only a handful of slaveholders since 2007, with fewer than six convictions and virtually no prison time served—underscoring the state's reluctance to enforce its own laws (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

One need only look to the upheaval in the United States following the abolition of slavery to grasp the scale of disruption true emancipation can bring. The post-Civil War period strained America's economic systems and governance to their core. The resistance and backlash that followed laid bare just how deeply slavery had been embedded in every aspect of society. Mauritania faces a similar reckoning—one it has so far chosen to delay by masking continuity with reform. [4] [6]

### **TRAPPED BY TRADITION: THE PERSONAL TOLL OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY**

While statistics and legal reforms provide but a skeletal view of slavery in Mauritania, the lived experience of those enslaved reveals the enduring brutality of the system. Slavery is not simply

an outdated economic arrangement; it is a system of total control that distorts identity, erases choice, and enforces obedience through fear, indoctrination, and isolation. Its victims are not only denied freedom of movement or the right to earn wages—they are denied the right to imagine themselves as free. In many or perhaps most cases, slaves by lineage are unaware their situation is illegal and/or immoral. [6] [2]

### **An Object to Buy, Sell, Gift, or Trade**

One Haratine woman, whose narrative was documented by Anti-Slavery International, was shared by four different households, all members of one family. In each case she was traded like livestock or furniture. Her labor was demanded without compensation, and she was never permitted to attend school. Religious leaders in her community told her repeatedly that her servitude was divinely ordained, and that to serve quietly was the will of God. This belief, instilled from early childhood, made resistance not only dangerous but spiritually unthinkable.

*"I was the property of four masters from the same family. They shared me, so each one had a period of the year where I was at his service. I herded their goats from a very young age, but I was never allowed to milk the goats to feed myself or my children. Sometimes my children and I would go for several days without eating."*  
[6]

Her story is far from unique. It illustrates how slavery continues not only through force, but through a culture of internalized submission and moral coercion.

### **Personal Observations**

In my own research and expert witness work, I have interviewed numerous individuals who share very similar stories. One young Mauritanian man, whose name and identifying details are withheld to protect his safety, was born into slavery and never spent a day in school. From a young age, he worked long hours tending livestock, hauling water, and performing domestic chores for a master who regularly beat him when he was slow, tired, or simply visible at the wrong moment. He believed this life was normal, even deserved—reinforced by community members and religious figures who told him obedience was holy. When he attempted to escape in his twenties, he was caught and returned by local authorities, who dismissed his complaints as a family matter. After a second escape attempt, he was ambushed and beaten by men loyal to the slaveholding family. With no birth certificate (common in Mauritania), no literacy, and no standing in society, he was left to survive on the streets of Nouakchott until he managed to flee the country. Presently he is in the United States, seeking asylum. His physical wounds have begun to heal, but the psychological scars from decades of dehumanization remain very deep.

Another survivor, a man born into the Adolhaji caste, lived his entire life in a tent on the outskirts of the town, serving a single family and subjected to near-daily beatings. He was never allowed to attend school or receive medical care. The only life he knew was one of subjugation, hardship, and isolation. After growing weary of the beatings, and after his father was beaten to death by his "owner," he fled the household and hid in a nearby town. But it was there that his caste identity betrayed him—members of the community, recognizing his origins and turned him in. This example underscores the devastating power of Social Liability: rather than protecting him, this man's social network became an instrument of punishment, enforcing his return to servitude. As I have argued, in tightly woven societies, the very networks that ordinarily offer

protection can become mechanisms of surveillance, coercion, and enforcement when individuals attempt to defy norms and entrenched roles. [7] This dynamic has been previously analyzed in my examination of caste-based slavery in Mauritania, where the mechanisms of control extend far beyond legal definitions and are embedded in kinship, compliance, and community betrayal. [8]

What ultimately gave him the courage and knowledge to escape a second time was a quiet conversation with a former slave who had broken free years earlier. This man told him that slavery was illegal in Mauritania, and that he had the right to live free. Until that moment, he truly believed that his bondage, while nearly unbearable, was both legal and moral. Without that interaction and exchange, he may never have known he had a choice and that is was a legitimate one. Presently, he too is seeking asylum in the United States—physically free, for the first time learning to read and write as an adult, but still carrying the trauma of betrayal, brutality, and a lifetime lived with no dignity.

These narratives each demonstrate the insidious role of Social Liability. In tightly knit tribal communities, it is not only the slaveholder who enforces obedience. Neighbors, extended relatives, and religious leaders all serve as enforcers of the social order. To challenge one's position within that hierarchy is to risk being cut off from the very networks that make survival possible: Social Capital. The transformation of social capital into a force of liability rather than protection is not unique to Mauritania. I explored this reversal in the context of honor-based violence in the Muslim world, where familial and tribal bonds become agents of repression rather than refuge. [9]

In the absence of institutional protection, escape is rarely liberation: it is exile. There is no government-funded shelter, no job program, no educational lifeline to help survivors build a new identity. Most return, not out of loyalty, but because hunger and isolation are more immediate and pressing than freedom.

The stories of Mauritania's enslaved do more than help humanize the issue. They expose the lie at the heart of the country's claims to reform. A justice system that returns escaped slaves to their masters is far from a system of justice. A society that perceives escape from slavery as a betrayal will not protect the escaped. And a government that tolerates this reality, even as it holds press conferences to celebrate anti-slavery laws, reveals its priorities: image over substance, tradition over rights, and control over change.

### **ABOLITION WITHOUT ENFORCEMENT: THE ILLUSION OF PROGRESS**

To the international community, Mauritania often presents the appearance of reform. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the country criminalized slavery in 2007, made it a crime against humanity in 2012, and created specialized anti-slavery courts in 2015. At face value, these steps signal not only progress, but intent to do better. To join the international moral ground that slavery is abhorrent and in opposition to moral standards of the state.

However, beneath the surface these actions serve as political cover, camouflaging them as genuine tools for justice. The laws exist, but they are rarely applied. The courts exist, but they rarely convict. And while civil society organizations are permitted to function, their reach is deliberately constrained. This is abolition without enforcement; an empty framework designed

to appease donors, deflect international criticism, and preserve the status quo. The tragic reality is that they are working.

The statistics alone are as eye-opening as they are damning. According to the U.S. Department of State's 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report, Mauritania has prosecuted only a small number of slavery cases since criminalization and obtained even fewer convictions. In 2022, the government initiated just one prosecution for hereditary slavery, and by mid-2023, there had been no convictions reported for that year (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Sentences, when imposed, are often far lighter than the legal maximum. Survivors who file complaints face long delays, disbelief, or outright retaliation. In some cases, victims are even returned to their former masters while awaiting trial or find that their claims are dismissed by judges with ties to slaveholding families. [6]. As I have discovered in multiple asylum cases where I served as an expert witness, a slave returning to a former "master" after attempting freedom results in beatings and even death. One client was brutally beaten before being chained to a tree for multiple days without food or water to punish him for his efforts to seek freedom. [5]

The Mauritanian government's failure to enforce its anti-slavery law is not incidental—it is strategic. Saidou Wane with SOS-Esclaves, an NGO supporting slaves seeking freedom, believes Mauritania allows anti-slavery NGOs to operate not because it welcomes their efforts, but because their presence helps the government save face with the international community. [4] These organizations exist in a precarious space: tolerated as long as they remain quiet, but targeted when they gain traction.

"Slavery is a taboo topic in Mauritania," Wane explained. "You can be imprisoned just for raising it." Indeed, anti-slavery activists have been harassed, arrested, and imprisoned for speaking out. The government's preferred solution is to deny the problem exists, or to claim that "no one is truly enslaved anymore"; a message repeated in both public speeches and official correspondence with foreign governments. [4]

Even Mauritania's so-called "special courts" for prosecuting slavery cases function more as symbols than mechanisms of change. As the Global Slavery Index and multiple UN human rights bodies have noted, these courts are under-resourced, lack properly trained personnel, and rarely rule in favor of victims. In many instances, courts have reframed slavery complaints as private or familial disputes, downplaying the criminal nature of the offense [10] [11]. Survivors are expected to present documentation they do not possess or provide witnesses who are unwilling to testify for fear of retaliation—a requirement that makes justice virtually unattainable. [10] The result is predictable: few cases progress, and fewer still end in convictions.

### **GLOBAL COMPLICITY: WHY THE WORLD LOOKS AWAY**

While Mauritania bears primary responsibility for the endurance of slavery within its borders, the international community is far from blameless. Year after year, foreign governments, multilateral donors, and global institutions issue statements condemning slavery, while at the same time continuing to funnel financial aid, trade deals, and diplomatic support to Mauritania with few meaningful conditions. This cycle of rhetoric absent of consequence not only fails to incentivize reform; it implicitly rewards the status quo.

## **Geopolitics**

One explanation lies in geopolitics. As a fragile buffer state in the Sahel region—surrounded by instability in Mali, Algeria, and Western Sahara—Mauritania is considered a strategic partner in counterterrorism and migration control. Western governments, especially the United States and the European Union, have prioritized Mauritania's cooperation on security and migration over human rights concerns. [5] [12] This creates a dangerous trade-off: so long as Mauritania contains refugees, polices borders, and participates in anti-terrorism efforts, its internal abuses are largely ignored.

## **International Aid as a Double-edged Gift**

Development aid and trade relationships further entrench this silence. Mauritania receives hundreds of millions in foreign assistance, including support from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa [13] the World Bank [14] and various UN agencies [12] Much of this funding is disbursed with minimal human rights conditionality, enabling the government to continue performative reforms while avoiding real accountability. Donor countries are reluctant to suspend funding or trade privileges for fear of driving Mauritania closer to authoritarian partners such as China or Russia. Thus, despite the clear documentation of slavery's persistence, foreign aid continues to flow, often to the very institutions that obstruct justice. [10]

## **Local Politics**

Even well-intentioned efforts by NGOs and international agencies are sometimes co-opted. When external actors establish programs to assist slavery survivors, they often must do so in partnership with local officials—many of whom are embedded in the same caste-based structures that perpetuate servitude. Survivors may be placed in shelters only to be returned to their owners once foreign observers leave. In such an environment, symbolic action becomes easier than structural change, and the fiction of progress is maintained for the benefit of foreign audiences [4] [6].

The result is a global ecosystem that props up a government engaged in systematic denial. This international tolerance—whether motivated by strategic interest, economic calculation, or bureaucratic inertia—creates a feedback loop: as long as Mauritania faces no serious consequence for its failure to eradicate slavery, the political incentive to do so remains nonexistent. Impunity, in this sense, is not only a domestic failure; it is an international design.

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL AFTERMATH: SLAVERY'S LONG SHADOW**

Even when a person escapes slavery in Mauritania, the system they flee continues to shape their sense of self, their access to justice, and their place in society. Survivors are often physically free but psychologically and socially entrapped, carrying with them the weight of stigma, trauma, and silence. The aftershocks of slavery echo in how they see themselves and how society sees them. Most have been denied education, healthcare, legal documentation, and family ties outside their caste.

Even after liberation, many do not know how to assert their rights or trust legal or state authorities to protect them. Their marginalization is not simply economic or legal; it is psychosocial, deeply tied to identity. They may still use the name of the family that enslaved them. They may avoid testifying against former masters out of fear or shame. In some cases,

they are returned to slavery by relatives or community members, as in the case of the man born into the Adolhaj tribe, who was turned in by townspeople who recognized his caste status.

This trauma is compounded by cultural conditioning. As Human Rights Watch and Anti-Slavery International have noted, Mauritania's caste hierarchy has been normalized for so long that many survivors internalize a belief in their own inferiority [4] [6] The system teaches them not only submission, but silence. Even when laws exist to protect them, they may not access those rights because centuries of oppression have taught them that the system is not meant for them. Moreover, society does not make room for return. Survivors often live in informal settlements or on the outskirts of towns, lacking community, income, or political representation. The few anti-slavery shelters that exist operate under precarious conditions, and most offer only temporary aid. [10] Even former slaves who reach the United States or Europe—such as the survivors referenced in this paper—must often begin life completely from scratch, carrying the invisible burden of trauma that few outside their community fully understand.

In my own work supporting Mauritanian asylum seekers, I have observed firsthand how survivors arrive with no formal education or literacy skills. Slavery robbed them not only of freedom but of the most basic tools for navigating modern life. Many of my clients have had to learn to read and write for the first time after escaping to the United States, often well into adulthood. The psychological toll is profound: they carry the residue of beatings, isolation, and invisibility. The process of building a new life is as much about learning to believe in one's humanity as it is about legal freedom.

The legacy of slavery is thus not merely a matter of past abuse, but of present and persistent exclusion. It is written into the mental health of survivors, the structure of their opportunities, and the story that society tells about them. Until these legacies are acknowledged and dismantled, true abolition will remain out of reach.

### **SLAVERY BEYOND MAURITANIA: A GLOBAL CONTINUUM**

While this paper centers on Mauritania, it is important to understand that the endurance of slavery is not unique to one country. Around the world, millions remain trapped in systems that mirror Mauritania's in structure if not in name.

In countries like India and Pakistan, bonded labor persists through hereditary debt cycles and caste-based exclusion, particularly in brick kilns, agriculture, and textile industries. [10] [15]

In the Gulf States, the kafala system creates conditions of modern-day slavery for domestic workers from Africa and South Asia, who are often stripped of their passports and subjected to abuse with little legal recourse. [16]

Even in the United States and Europe, forced labor and trafficking persist. Migrant laborers, often undocumented, face exploitation in agriculture, construction, domestic work, and the sex trade, frequently under threat of deportation. (U.S. Department of State, 2023) [12]

These systems differ in cultural form but are bound by a common denominator: the exploitation of marginalized populations for economic gain, often sanctioned, or simply ignored, by the very

governments that claim to oppose them. The case of Mauritania, then, is not an outlier but a mirror held up to a broader global failure.

### CONCLUSION

Slavery in Mauritania has not ended. It has simply changed its clothing—draped in the legal trappings of abolition, masked by rhetoric, and buried under silence. Despite official bans and public denials, slavery persists because it continues to serve the interests of those in power. It is not an accident or an oversight. It is a system of control sustained by cultural conditioning, tribal enforcement, state complicity, and international indifference. It survives not in the shadows, but in plain sight, protected by the very institutions that claim to oppose it.

This paper has explored the false promises of legal reform, the misuse of social capital as a tool of containment, and the global tolerance for injustice when geopolitics and donor relations take precedence over truth. It has shown that even those who escape slavery carry deep psychological scars and systemic disadvantages that rarely vanish with physical freedom. These legacies are not incidental; they are structural. And they are designed to endure.

As a scholar and practitioner, I have witnessed the lived experience of modern-day slaves. I have met men and women who arrived in the United States having never held a pen or a book, never having seen a doctor, and unaware that by simply being human, they had rights. Some were turned in by their own communities when they tried to escape. Others were freed only by chance—through a quiet conversation, a trusted ally, or an encounter with someone who told them the truth: they were not born to serve. These stories must not remain footnotes in history. They are the frontline of a global failure we must name and confront.

Ending slavery in Mauritania will require more than symbolic laws and polished donor reports. It will demand confronting caste-based hierarchies, supporting survivor-led movements, holding the state accountable for its betrayals, and rejecting the polite lies that pass for progress. Scholars, governments, and civil society must collectively reject the notion that partial freedom is enough.

The time has passed for treating slavery as a hidden issue or a relic of the past. Slavery is not over. It is preserved because it profits. And silence, whether born of convenience, cowardice, or diplomacy, is complicity.

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