

# New Internationalist

The people, the ideas, the action in the fight for global justice

## Slavery in Mauritania

NEW INTERNATIONALIST

EASIER ENGLISH

Intermediate READY LESSON



# Where is Mauritania? And how many slaves are there?



Scan the next slide - one minute only - to find out

Mauritania is a large desert country with a low population and there is a lot of slavery. But slavery became illegal in 1981 and it became a crime against humanity in 2012.

Mauritania is on the west coast of the Sahara, and the 2013 Global Slavery Index says it has the highest number of slaves per head of population. This index was created by Walk Free Foundation (the anti-slavery charity); they found that 151,000 people –almost four per cent of the population – could be slaves. Other groups have said it could be up to 20 per cent.

Slavery in Mauritania is “chattel slavery”; people own generations of slaves and their families. The first slaves were captured a long time ago by slave-owning groups, and all their families have been slaves since then.

It is also mixed with racism. Mauritania has three main ethnic groups: Haratins, Afro-Mauritanians and White Moors. Generational slavery continues because people think the Haratins (black Africans stolen from villages a few centuries ago in Arab-African wars) are the property of the White Moors.

[http://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Slavery\\_in\\_Mauritania](http://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Slavery_in_Mauritania)

Now read again and find out:

a) When did slavery become illegal?

b) What are the three main ethnic groups in Mauritania?

(now it's the original, not Easy English)

In the large, sparsely populated desert country of Mauritania, slavery is rife – despite being outlawed in 1981 and made a crime against humanity in 2012.

Mauritania, on the western coast of the Sahara, has the highest prevalence of slavery per head of population, according to the 2013 Global Slavery Index. Compiled by the anti-slavery charity Walk Free Foundation, the index found that 151,000 people – almost four per cent of the entire population – may be living in slavery. Estimates by other groups put this figure at up to 20 per cent.

Slavery in Mauritania primarily takes the form of chattel slavery, with slave status being passed down through the generations from people originally captured during historical raids by slave-owning groups.

It is also tied up with racism. Mauritanian society is made up of three main ethnic groups: Haratins, Afro-Mauritanians and White Moors. Generational slavery is perpetuated because Haratins – black Africans stolen from villages a few centuries ago during Arab-African wars – are traditionally seen as the property of the White Moors.

Why do you think they have slavery there?

a) Economic reasons?

b) Religious reasons?

c) Power and control?

Read the next slide to find out.....

Abidine Ould-Merzough (a human rights activist from the Haratin community who now lives in Germany) says the White Moors (a minority in Mauritania) have too much political power. 'They don't allow the Haratin community to develop. If they allow them education, they will refuse to be slaves and will compete for power,' he says.

Also, in Mauritania, people use religious teachings to say slavery is OK. 'One understanding of Islam says that society is in two parts – masters and slaves,' says Ould-Merzough. 'The slaves accept this and believe that God wants them to be slaves.'

Some critics say that people don't want to stop slavery in Mauritania because the country is in an important place politically (they say it is an important friend of the West against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). And the Mauritanian government says that slavery is not allowed; they say they give strong punishments to any slavery they find.

There are shocking stories and statistics about slavery, but there are positive things happening too. 'The anti-slavery movement in Mauritania is growing and that really keeps me optimistic,' says Saidou Wane (Mauritanian human rights activist in the US). 'There is some progress: people are starting to understand the problems. And all groups are starting to understand - some Arabs [White Moors] are getting involved, too'.

# Vocabulary:

Look at the next slide – it's the original (difficult) article.

Try to work out the meaning of the underlined phrases from the context.

Then match the easy English with the original.



Abidine Ould-Merzough, a human rights activist and member of the Haratin community now living in Germany, says the White Moors – a minority in Mauritania – wield a disproportionate amount of political power. ‘They want to keep the Haratin community underdeveloped – if they allow them to be educated, they will refuse to be slaves and will be a competitor for power,’ he says.

Indoctrination is a key feature of slavery in Mauritania, with religious teachings used to justify the practices of slavery. ‘There’s an interpretation of Islam that says society is divided into two – masters and slaves,’ says Ould-Merzough. ‘The slaves accept this and believe their status is willed by God.’

Some critics say that Mauritania’s geopolitical role (it’s seen as an important Western ally against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) has led to slavery in the country being overlooked. As for the Mauritanian government, it emphasizes the fact that slavery is prohibited and says that any cases that come to light are vigorously punished.

Despite the shocking stories and hard-hitting statistics about the prevalence of slavery, there are positive developments afoot. ‘The anti-slavery movement in Mauritania is becoming bigger and bigger and that really keeps me optimistic,’ says Saidou Wane, a Mauritanian human rights activist based in the US. ‘There is progress being made: people are waking up and starting to understand the issue. And it’s happening across the board, with some Arabs [White Moors] getting involved, too.’

# Match (easy English and original):

1/ God wants them to be slaves

2/ have too much (power)

3/ they give strong punishments to any slavery they find

4/ all groups are starting to understand

5/ say (slavery) is OK

6/ some good things are happening

a) wield a disproportionate amount of (power)

b) justify the practice of (slavery)

c) their status is willed by God

d) any cases that come to light are vigorously punished

e) there are positive developments afoot

f) it's happening across the board

# Now fill the gaps with small words:

Mauritania is a large desert country a)..... a low population and there is a b).... of slavery. But slavery became illegal in 1981 and c)..... became a crime against humanity d)..... 2012.

Mauritania is e)..... the west coast of the Sahara, and the 2013 Global Slavery Index says it has f).... highest number of slaves per head g)..... population. This index h)..... created by Walk Free Foundation (the anti-slavery charity); they found i)..... 151,000 people – almost four per j)..... of the population – could be slaves. Other groups have said it could be up to 20 per cent.

What do you think of  
the slavery in  
Mauritania?



Write an letter to the  
government of  
Mauritania to tell them.