

# MAURITANIA 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic with a president as head of state and a constitution grounded in French civil law and sharia (Islamic law). The National Assembly exercises legislative functions but was weak relative to the executive. Voters elect the president, deputies to the National Assembly, municipal mayors, and regional councilors. In June 2019 voters elected former minister of defense Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani as president with 52 percent of the vote. The election marked the first democratic transition of power between two elected presidents since the country's independence in 1960. United Nations and African Union observers considered the election to be relatively free and fair. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Union for the Republic, the political party founded by former president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, won 95 of 157 seats in the National Assembly.

The National Police, which is responsible for enforcing the law and maintaining order in urban areas, reports to the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization. The National Guard performs a limited police function in keeping with its peacetime role as the guarantor of physical security at government facilities, to include prisons. The National Guard reports to the Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization. Regional authorities may call upon the National Guard to restore civil order during riots and other large-scale disturbances. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary organization under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order around metropolitan areas and providing law enforcement services in rural areas. The Ministry of Interior and Decentralization's General Group for Road Safety maintains security on roads and operates checkpoints throughout the country. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. Members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included: an unlawful or arbitrary killing by the government; allegations of sexual abuse by the country's peacekeepers; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests; blasphemy laws; restrictions on

freedom of association; widespread corruption; lack of investigation and accountability for violence against women and girls; trafficking in persons including continued existence of slavery and slavery-related practices; criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct; and the existence of some of the worst forms of child labor.

The government took steps to identify, investigate, and punish officials who committed abuses and prosecuted some abusers, but officials frequently acted with impunity. Civil society organizations objected to the scant number of indictments handed down by authorities.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There was one report that government agents committed an arbitrary or unlawful killing. The regional prosecutor is in charge of investigating whether security force killings are justifiable and pursuing prosecution. Each security service also maintains internal investigative bodies to determine whether security force killings were justifiable and can pursue administrative action.

On May 30, a military patrol shot and killed Abass Diallo, a 34-year-old Mauritanian citizen, while he was transporting goods near the country's southern border. The regional prosecutor opened an investigation into the incident; there was no prosecution by the end of the year.

### **b. Disappearance**

There were no reports of disappearances by, or on behalf of, government authorities.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading**

## Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits torture. The law considers torture, acts of torture, and inhuman or degrading punishments as crimes against humanity not subject to a statute of limitations. The law specifically covers activities in prisons, rehabilitation centers for minors in conflict with the law, places of custody, psychiatric institutions, detention centers, areas of transit, and border crossing points.

On May 23, three officers with the Traffic Safety Police arrested and harassed a group of young persons. Video of the arrest was widely shared on social media and showed the officers kicking and harassing the group. The officers involved were arrested and immediately removed from the Traffic Safety Police Force.

During the year, according to the *Conduct in UN Field Missions* online portal, there were two allegations submitted of sexual exploitation and abuse by Mauritanian peacekeepers deployed to UN peacekeeping missions. Both cases involved transactional sex with an adult.

The National Mechanism for Prevention of Torture (MNP) is an independent governmental body charged with investigating credible allegations of torture. The government appointed new members of the MNP in September. The MNP has not launched any investigations since its inception in 2016.

Complaints filed with the courts for allegations of torture were submitted to police for investigation. The government continued to deny the existence of “unofficial” detention centers, even though NGOs and the United Nations pointed out their continuing usage. Neither the MNP nor the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) directly addressed the existence of these places.

Impunity was a serious problem in the security forces, and it was identified in police forces and the National Guard. Politicization, corruption, and ethnic tensions between the Beydane-majority security forces and Haratine (“Black Moor” Arab slave descendants) and sub-Saharan communities were primary factors contributing to impunity. The government took some steps to conduct information sessions on human rights with security forces. On September 25, the

Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization circulated directives to the security services that emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and that no one is above or outside of the law.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions remained life threatening due to persistent food shortages, violence, inadequate sanitary conditions, lack of adequate medical care, and indefinite pretrial detention.

**Physical Conditions:** Prisons remained overcrowded. In 2018 the UN Committee Against Torture reported that authorities held 2,321 detainees in facilities designed for 2,280 persons. Authorities frequently grouped pretrial detainees with convicts who represented a danger to other prisoners. Male guards frequently monitored female inmates, a practice criticized by the CNDH.

There were two separate prisons for women, one in the capital Nouakchott and the other in the country's second-largest city, Nouadhibou. Almost all supervisors of female inmates were male because the all-male National Guard was assigned the task of supervising prisons nationwide. The few female supervisors in prisons were not members of the National Guard, but rather were members of civil protection teams (firefighters). Detention conditions for women were generally better than those for men. According to prison officials, the women's prison in Nouakchott was less crowded than those for men.

Prison authorities held a mixed population of prisoners in prison facilities, regardless of their specific sentences. Drugs were often trafficked among prisoners, which the government acknowledged was caused by lax security procedures surrounding visitors. Prisoners often rebelled and disobeyed authorities, in some cases to protest violence and inhuman treatment meted out by jailers. Poor security conditions and the indiscriminate grouping of inmates meant that prisoners often lived with the threat of violence, while some had to bribe other prisoners to avoid brutalization and harassment. Salafist prisoners complained of mistreatment at the Central Civil Prison of Nouakchott. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGO) reported that in Dar Naim, the largest prison in the country, inmates partially managed one wing of the prison while staff secured the other

half. Narcotics, weapons, and cash reportedly circulated freely because staff could not effectively screen goods that entered the prison and could not safely enter some areas.

Human rights groups continued to deplore the lack of adequate sanitation and medical facilities in prisons nationwide, particularly in the Dar Naim men's prison and at the Central Civil Prison of Nouakchott. The government allocated a budget of 50 ouguiyas (\$1.35) a day for each prisoner for food and medical supplies, an amount observers deemed inadequate. Ventilation, lighting, and potable water in many cells and holding areas ranged from inadequate to nonexistent.

In 2018 the Directorate of Penal Affairs and Prison Administration within the Ministry of Justice established a youth detention center in Nouakchott, which held 58 minors during the year. The regular prison in Nouadhibou held nine minors. An Italian NGO continued to operate a separate detention center for minors, the only prison facility that came close to meeting international standards. These facilities operated in addition to youth detention centers located in police stations throughout the country.

**Administration:** Authorities permitted prisoners to file allegations of abuse with the CNDH and the MNP. Government regulations also allowed inmates to elect one representative in dealings with the prison administration, and prisoners occasionally made use of this opportunity. The government acknowledged allegations of inhuman conditions but rarely took corrective action. Periodically prisoners were transferred to prisons in the interior of the country to alleviate the overflow of prisoners held in Nouakchott; however, these transfers often meant that prisoners were separated from their families and legal representatives, and it increased the average length of time prisoners were held in pretrial detention.

**Independent Monitoring:** The government permitted prison and detention center visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The CNDH carried out unannounced visits to these detention centers. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had unlimited access to prisons and conducted multiple visits, including visits to prisoners suspected of terrorist

activities.

**Improvements:** International and local partners, including the ICRC, the Noura Foundation, and Caritas-Mauritania, contributed to the improvement of general hygiene and living conditions in the detention centers and prisons with the support of the government. In particular the ICRC helped to improve infrastructure, hygiene, and health conditions in detention centers and rehabilitated the sanitation network of Dar Naim Prison. The ICRC also implemented a program to combat malnutrition in prisons, including the main prisons in Aleg and Dar Naim, by rehabilitating kitchen facilities and periodically providing medicines and other hygiene products.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but authorities did not always observe these prohibitions. A detainee has the legal right to challenge the lawfulness of his or her detention under two circumstances: first, if a person remains arrested after the end of his or her legal period of detention; and second, if the detainee disagrees with his or her sentence, in which case he or she has the right to file an appeal before a court of appeal or the Supreme Court.

#### **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

Authorities generally did not inform detainees of the accusations against them until the conclusion of police investigation. With few exceptions, individuals could not be detained for more than 48 hours without evidence, and prosecutors may extend the period for an additional 48 hours in some cases. Because nonbusiness days are not counted within this 48-hour maximum period, police officers often arrested individuals on a Wednesday or Thursday to keep them in custody for a full week. If a person is detained on terrorism charges, that individual can be held in custody for as long as 45 days. The law requires that a suspect be brought before a judicial officer and charged with a crime within 48 hours; however, authorities did not generally respect this right.

The 126th UN Human Rights Committee conducted its periodic country review in 2019 and noted police records of detainees in police stations were poorly maintained. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the

right to contact an attorney. By law indigent defendants are entitled to an attorney at state expense, but legal representation was frequently either unavailable or attorneys did not speak the defendant's language (and were not always provided translation services). Judges often arbitrarily refused requests for bail or set inordinately high bail amounts.

**Arbitrary Arrest:** During the year authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained protesters, human rights activists, and journalists (see section 2.a.). Between February 13 and 15, police arrested 15 persons, most of whom had taken part in a meeting organized in a private residence by the Alliance for the Refoundation of the Mauritanian State (AREM), a group that advocates secularism in the country. Eight of the 15, including the five men who were held in pretrial detention until the court heard their case on October 20, were ultimately convicted “of failure to observe the prohibitions prescribed by Allah.” All five men who were kept in pretrial detention were released by October 26 (see section 2.a.).

**Pretrial Detention:** Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem, although no statistics on the average length of detention were available. In 2018 the UN Committee Against Torture reported that 38 percent of detainees were pretrial detainees. As of September there were approximately 1,500 persons in pretrial detention throughout the country. Members of the security forces sometimes arrested demonstrators and held them longer than the legal maximum time, often due to lack of capacity to process cases in a timely manner, and in some cases to obtain confessions. By law authorities may not hold a minor for more than six months while the detainee awaits trial. Nevertheless, there were reports of many individuals, including minors, remaining in pretrial detention for excessively long periods due to judicial inefficiency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most jurisdictions stopped processing cases, and both the rate and length of pretrial detention increased despite periodic releases of pretrial detainees by the Ministry of Justice.

## **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government took steps to increase judicial independence and impartiality. Nevertheless, the executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary

through its ability to appoint and remove judges. Authorities did not always respect or enforce court orders. Observers often perceived judges to be corrupt and unskilled.

### **Trial Procedures**

The law provides for due process, and defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty. The law requires that authorities inform defendants of the charges against them within 48 hours, but the government did not normally respect this provision. Defendants often did not learn of the charges against them until police investigation was complete. Authorities generally provided defendants with free interpretation as required; however, the quality of these services was generally poor. Defendants have the right to a fair and public trial. They also have the right to be present during their trial. All defendants, including the indigent, have the right to legal counsel, but authorities rarely respected this right. Likewise, defendants may confront or question witnesses and present witnesses and evidence in both civil and criminal cases.

Defendants generally had adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense. Defendants enjoy the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have the right of appeal. These rights extend to minorities and men but do not extend equally to women. Court proceedings are by law conducted in Arabic, and interpreters are not always available for those defendants who do not speak the language. Some bilingual judges could communicate with defendants in French. Sharia is, in part, the basis for trial procedures. Courts did not always treat women equally with men during these proceedings.

A special court for minors hears cases involving persons younger than age 18. Children who appeared before the court received more lenient sentences than adults, and extenuating circumstances received greater consideration. The



minimum age for a child to stand trial is 12 years.

### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

### **Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies**

Complaints of human rights abuses fall within the jurisdiction of the Administrative Court. Individuals or organizations may appeal decisions to international and regional courts. NGO representatives stated they collaborated with the Administrative Court but added it was not impartial. There are administrative remedies through the social chambers in both the court of appeals and the Supreme Court.

### **Property Restitution**

Property ownership in the southern regions has been controversial since the government expelled tens of thousands of non-Arab sub-Saharan from communities along the Senegal River Valley (Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) between 1989 and 1991 amid tensions with neighboring Senegal. Many non-Arabs were dispossessed of their land, which regional officials subsequently sold or ceded to Beydane, also known as “Arabo-Berbers” and “White Moors” (see section 6). Although the government continued to make modest efforts to indemnify returning deportees, it did not fully restore their property rights. The government reimbursed some dispossessed in cash and provided jobs for others.

### **f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution prohibits such actions, although there were numerous reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions. For example, authorities often

entered homes without judicial or other appropriate authorization.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, but the government arbitrarily and selectively applied regulations to suppress individuals or groups of individuals who opposed government policies.

Individuals were generally free to criticize the government publicly but were occasionally subject to retaliation. The constitution and law prohibit racial or ethnic propaganda. The government sometimes used these provisions against political opponents, accusing them of “racism” or “promoting national disunity” for speaking out against the extreme underrepresentation in government of disadvantaged populations, namely the Haratines and sub-Saharan Africans.

**Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media:** Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with limited restrictions. Throughout the year incidents of government retaliation against media decreased significantly compared with the previous year. Independent media remained the principal source of information for most citizens, followed by government media. Government media focused primarily on official news, but provided increased coverage of opposition activities and views.

**Violence and Harassment:** There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists during the year. On June 3, police arrested Eby Ould Zeidane based on a Facebook post in which he challenged the dates Mauritians observe the annual fast in the Islamic month of Ramadan. Eby was released on June 8. Another blogger, Mommeu Ould Bouzouma, was arrested on May 5 and spent 10 days in detention for criticizing the governor of the Tiris Zemmour region. In January authorities arrested two reporters for Sahel TV, Mohamed Ali Ould Abdel Aziz and Abdou O. Tajeddine. The reporters were arrested for videos and articles deemed insulting to the president. They were released after two days.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions:** Local NGOs and bloggers, among other observers, reported that a government official met with journalists for four

international media outlets to warn them regarding one-sided coverage of slavery or sensitive topics that could harm national unity or the country's reputation.

**Libel/Slander Laws:** There is a law against blasphemy, which is punishable by death, although the country has not carried out any executions since 1987. Between February 13 and 15, authorities arrested 15 persons and later charged eight of them with blasphemy and insulting Islam after they attended a meeting organized by AREM; three of the eight were also charged with disseminating content that “undermines the values of Islam” under cybersecurity and terrorism laws. Five of the eight men were held in pretrial detention until their hearing on October 20. The Nouakchott West Criminal Court decided not to convict the men of blasphemy and instead convicted them of lesser crimes. The five men held in pretrial detention since February were all released by October 26 (see section 1.d.).

### **Internet Freedom**

During the year the government rarely restricted or disrupted access to the internet or censored online content, and there was no evidence that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. Between September 21 and September 30, the government disrupted the country's 3G network several times as part of a coordinated, annual effort to combat cheating on the national high school exams. The networks were immediately re-established upon conclusion of the exam period on each day.

On June 24, the National Assembly approved a new law aimed at prohibiting allegedly false news posts on social media. The law aims to fight against the manipulation of information during an election period or during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Many opposition parliamentarians as well as human rights activists denounced the law, declaring that it risks undermining the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution.

### **Academic Freedom and Cultural Events**

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events. A religious training center linked to the political opposition was shut down by the

government in 2018 and remained closed.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The constitution and law provide for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, but the government sometimes limited freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly. Registered political parties are not required to seek permission to hold meetings or demonstrations. The law requires NGO organizers to apply for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Authorities usually granted permission but on some occasions denied it in circumstances that NGOs claimed were politically motivated.

### **Freedom of Association**

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally, but not in every instance, respected this right. During the year authorities continued to prevent several NGOs, including prominent antislavery organizations, from registering and legally operating. The law requires that the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization grant authorization prior to an association operating in the country. On February 18, the government held workshops with NGOs and members of civil society to get feedback on a proposed law that would alter the registration process for associations and allow NGOs that have been denied registration a chance to operate more freely.

## **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

## **d. Freedom of Movement**

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights, with some exceptions. From March through early September, the government

maintained a number of restrictions on freedom of movement in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. These included a halt on all international and most interregional travel, as well as a nighttime curfew.

**In-country Movement:** Persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. As in previous years, government security and safety measures included frequent use of mobile roadblocks where gendarmes, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers.

### **e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Not Applicable.

### **f. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, vulnerable migrants, and other persons of concern. Resources provided by the government were inadequate to meet the assistance needs of these populations. On July 7, the parliament approved new legislation on human trafficking and migration that focus on the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and protection of victims.

**Access to Asylum:** The law provides for granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The UNHCR carries out refugee status determinations under its mandate and then presents cases to the National Consultative Commission for Refugees for recognition.

In accordance with agreements with the Economic Community of West African States on freedom of movement, the government allows West Africans to remain in the country for up to three months, after which they must apply for residency or work permits. Authorities immediately deported migrants determined to be

illegally seeking to reach Spain's nearby Canary Islands.

### **g. Stateless Persons**

According to the law, children born to Mauritanian fathers and foreign mothers are automatically Mauritanian, whether born inside or outside the country. The law allows children born outside the country to Mauritanian mothers and foreign men to obtain Mauritanian nationality at age 17. If the father is stateless, children born outside the country are subject to statelessness until age 17, at which point the child is eligible for nationality. The unwillingness of local authorities to process thousands of sub-Saharan Africans who returned from Senegal following their mass expulsion between 1989 and 1991 rendered the returnees stateless.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

### **Elections and Political Participation**

**Recent Elections:** Voters elected former minister of defense Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani as president with 52 percent of the vote in the June 2019 presidential election. Prominent antislavery activist and politician Biram Dah Abeid placed second with 19 percent of the vote, while Mohamed Ould Boubacar, a former prime minister backed by the Islamist party, placed third with 17 percent. Observers from the United Nations and African Union judged the election to be relatively free and fair, with no evidence of large-scale fraud that could have materially influenced the outcome of the vote. The presidential elections represented the first transition of power from one democratically elected leader to another since the country's independence in 1960.

In 2018 the party founded by the former president, the Union for the Republic, won 95 of 157 seats in the National Assembly in legislative elections, which the African Union judged to be relatively free and fair.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** There are some restrictions on the

ability for political parties to register. By decree all political parties must be able to gain at least one percent of votes in two consecutive elections, and this decree continues to limit the overall number of political parties that can participate. The government continued to deny the registration for some activist parties, including the Forces of Progressive Change. The government took some steps to address the ethnic disparity in political leadership. Under the previous regime, the Beydane elite (“White Moor” Arabs) accounted for at most 30 percent of the population but occupied approximately 80 percent of government leadership positions; Haratines constituted at least 45 percent of the population but held fewer than 10 percent of the positions; and the various sub-Saharan ethnic groups (Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) constituted an estimated 25 percent of the population and accounted for fewer than 10 percent of leadership positions. Of the 26 ministers in the cabinet, five come from a Haratine ethnic background, and five from a sub-Saharan ethnic background. Unlike in previous governments, the existing cabinet is largely made up of technocrats.

**Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups:** No laws limit the participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Traditional and cultural factors restricted women from participating in political life on an equal basis with men. Despite laws promoting women’s access to elective positions (including a quota of 20 percent of seats reserved for women on lists of candidates in legislative and local elections and a quota of 20 seats reserved for women in the National Assembly) the number of women in electoral politics remained low. Following the 2018 legislative elections, women held 19.6 percent of seats in the 157-member National Assembly, which was slightly lower compared to the 2014 election results in which women held 22 percent of seats. Five women were named to the new cabinet: one from the non-Arab sub-Saharan ethnic community, one from the Haratine ethnic community, and three from the Beydane (“White Moor”) ethnic community.

## **Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government**

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by government officials, but

authorities did not enforce the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were reports of government corruption during the year. The law defines corruption as “all exploitation by a public agent of his position for personal purposes, whether this agent is elected, or in an administrative or judicial position.” During the year the country initiated its first-ever parliamentary investigation into corrupt practices under the previous regime.

**Corruption:** Corruption and impunity were serious problems in public administration, and the government rarely held officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses. There were reports government officials frequently used their power to obtain personal favors, such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and preferential treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement but was also common in the distribution of official documents, fishing and mining licenses, land distribution, as well as in bank loans and tax payments. On January 30, the parliament established a commission of inquiry empowered to investigate allegations of serious irregularities in awarding public contracts and the embezzlement of revenues from oil, fishing, and public land sales by the previous president and other senior government officials. The commission issued its report in July and offered specific recommendations for judiciary action. In August specialized police investigators began interrogations of the former president and hundreds of others named in the commission’s report. In August the president removed several members of his government from office, including the former prime minister, because they were implicated in the report. Members of civil society and the international community widely praised the quality and scope of the commission’s report.

**Financial Disclosure:** The government enforced the requirement that senior officials, including the president, file a declaration of their personal assets at the beginning and end of their government service. This information is not available to the public. There were no penalties for failing to comply.

## **Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of**



## **Human Rights**

Several domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views. Several domestic and international groups also reported evidence of a continued change in attitude under the new government, citing statements by government human rights bodies calling attention to international laws and conventions protecting human rights as well as an increased willingness to work with human rights groups.

Nevertheless, there were restrictions on some human rights groups, particularly those investigating cases of slavery and slavery-related practices. For example, authorities sometimes denied NGOs access to the prosecutor's office or the victim when they were investigating a possible slavery or slavery-related case.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The Commissariat for Human Rights and Humanitarian Action designs, promotes, and implements national human rights policies. The commissariat managed government and internationally funded human rights and humanitarian assistance programs. The CNDH, an independent ombudsman organization, includes government and civil society representatives. It actively monitored human rights conditions and advocated for government action to correct abuses. The CNDH produced an annual report on human rights topics, conducted regular investigations, including prison and police detention center facility visits, and made recommendations to the government. From November 2019 to January, the CNDH conducted an information "caravan" of public meetings throughout the country to sensitize marginalized, largely illiterate communities to their rights, including protections against slavery and other forms of forced labor. The CNDH launched another information caravan on October 1.

The government also sponsored the Civil Society Platform, a coordinating body which brings together more than 6,000 local NGOs, to help communicate and implement government policies.

## **Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking**

## in Persons

### Women

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** Rape of women is illegal. The law does not address rape of men. Rapists who are single men face penalties of imprisonment, forced labor, and whipping; married rapists are subject to the death penalty, although this penalty has not been enforced since 1987. The government increasingly enforced prison sentences for convicted rapists, but prosecution remained provisional. Nevertheless, as in years past, wealthy rape suspects reportedly avoided prosecution or, if prosecuted, avoided prison. It was common for the families of the rape survivor to reach an agreement with the perpetrator in the form of monetary compensation.

Rape survivors were discouraged from reporting the crime because they themselves could be jailed for having intercourse outside of marriage. Reliable data on gender-based violence remained sparse, and the situation of children and women who were victims of abuse was poorly documented. The subject continued to remain taboo due to social mores and traditional norms, which often call for survivors to be rejected by their family and society. On March 25, Khadijetou Oumar Sow, a 26-year-old woman, went missing. On April 12, her body was found, and an investigation concluded that she was raped twice before being strangled with a turban. Her killer is serving a life sentence in prison. On November 19, the Nouakchott North Criminal Court sentenced five men to death after they were convicted of the rape and murder of 27-year-old Oumeima Mohaamed Ahmed on September 3.

Spousal abuse and domestic violence are illegal, but there are no specific penalties for domestic violence. The government did not enforce the law effectively, and convictions were rare.

Police and the judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women rarely sought legal redress, relying instead on family, NGOs, and community leaders to resolve their domestic disputes. NGOs reported that, in certain cases, they sought police assistance to protect victims of domestic violence,

but police declined to investigate.

**Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C):** The law states that any act or attempt to damage a girl's sexual organs is punishable by imprisonment and a monetary fine. Authorities seldom applied the law, largely due to the lack of awareness by local authorities about the ordinance in the law that bans the practice. According to a 2015 UNICEF study, 67 percent of women aged 15 to 49 have undergone FGM/C. In certain regions in the southeastern part of the country, the prevalence is higher than 90 percent.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood, and Family continued to track the more than 2,000 traditional health providers who publicly abandoned the practice of FGM/C in an effort to ensure that the providers do not start the practice again.

**Other Harmful Traditional Practices:** Traditional forms of mistreatment of women continued to decline. One of these was the forced feeding of adolescent girls prior to marriage, practiced by some Beydane families and known as "gavage."

**Sexual Harassment:** There are no laws against sexual harassment. Women's NGOs reported that sexual harassment was a common problem in the workplace.

**Reproductive Rights:** According to the law, every couple has the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children, and to manage their reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. Nevertheless, many couples did not have access to the information or the means to enjoy these rights. The law does not extend the same rights to unmarried individuals since the law criminalizes sexual relations outside of marriage.

Although no legal or governmental policies adversely affected access to contraception, social, and cultural barriers significantly limited access to contraception. Barriers included rumors that contraception causes cancerous diseases, death, or infertility. Contraceptives were not widely available in health centers, and some religious fatwas forbid the use of contraception without the husband's permission. For unmarried women, a large stigma was associated with

seeking contraception.

According to the law, every woman has the right to a childbirth assisted by qualified health personnel, but many women lacked access to those services. Social stigmas and conservative sociocultural factors limited access to information and health services, particularly by adolescents. There were no legal barriers to accessing skilled health attendance during pregnancy and childbirth, but social and cultural factors, such as the prevalent use of traditional midwives, limited the use of these services.

The government provided limited access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. A unit in the Maternity and Child Center in Nouakchott treated female victims of sexual violence. This unit also gave women pills to prevent pregnancy after cases of rape. Access to these services was uncommon outside of Nouakchott, and, even when services were available, women were often discouraged from seeking assistance after incidents of sexual violence.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated the maternal mortality rate to be 766 per 100,000 live births. The high maternal mortality rate was due to lack of medical equipment, low participation by mothers in programs promoting prenatal care, births without the assistance of health professionals, poor sanitation, malnutrition, and high rates of adolescent pregnancy. FGM/C was a significant problem and contributed to maternal morbidity. The WHO estimated the adolescent (females aged 15-19) birth rate to be 84 per 1,000.

The proportion of women of reproductive age whose need for family planning was satisfied with modern methods was 35 percent, and the contraceptive prevalence rate for women aged 15-49, with any method, was 12 percent.

**Coercion in Population Control:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

**Discrimination:** Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and the more educated and urbanized members of the female population were more likely to enjoy these rights. Nevertheless, women in general had fewer legal rights than

men.

Additionally, women faced other forms of legal discrimination. According to sharia as applied in the country, the testimony of two women was required to equal that of one man. The courts granted only one-half as large an indemnity to the family of a female victim as that accorded to the family of a male victim. The personal status code provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and sharia-based family law, but judicial officials did not always respect it. There were legal restrictions on women's employment, including limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous and certain industries including mining and construction (see section 7.d.).

## **Children**

**Birth Registration:** By law a person derives citizenship from one's father. One can derive citizenship from one's mother under either of the following conditions: if the mother is a citizen and the father's nationality is unknown or he is stateless, or if the child was born in the country to a citizen mother and the child repudiates the father's nationality a year before reaching majority. Children born abroad to citizen mothers and foreign men can acquire citizenship one year before reaching the majority age of 18. Minor children of parents who are naturalized citizens are also eligible for citizenship.

The process of registering a child and subsequently receiving a birth certificate was reportedly difficult. Failure to register could result in denial of some public services, such as education.

**Education:** The law mandates six years of school attendance for all children, but the law was not effectively enforced. Many children, particularly girls, did not attend school for the mandatory six years. Children of lower castes from both Haratine and sub-Saharan families often did not receive any formal education.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** The legal marriage age is 18, but authorities rarely enforced the law, and child marriage was widespread. Since consensual sex outside of marriage is illegal, a legal guardian can ask local authorities to permit a girl younger than 18 to marry. Local authorities frequently granted permission. The government continued to work with UNICEF to implement a program to

combat child marriage through a series of judicial and political reforms.

In 2017 according to UNICEF, 37 percent of girls were married before the age of 18, and 18 percent were married before the age of 15.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law prohibits sexual relations with a child younger than 18, with penalties of six months to two years in prison and a fine. Possession of child pornography is illegal, with penalties of two months to one year in prison and a fine. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is illegal, and conviction carries penalties of five to 10 years in prison and a substantial fine. NGOs asserted the laws were not properly enforced.

**Displaced Children:** According to the minister of social affairs, childhood, and family, there were more than 16,000 children who need protection, including children without civil documentation, uneducated children, and victims of child labor.

**International Child Abductions:** The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

## **Anti-Semitism**

A very small number of foreign residents practiced Judaism. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

## **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. The law provides for access to information and communication, and to existing public buildings through retrofitting and future

buildings through amendments to the building code. Authorities did not enforce the law, and persons with disabilities generally did not have access to buildings, information, and communications. Children with disabilities attended school through secondary education at a significantly lower rate than other children.

## **Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups**

Haratine and sub-Saharan ethnic groups faced governmental discrimination while the Beydane ethnic group received governmental preference. For example individuals living in Western Sahara (who are of Beydane ethnicity) easily obtained national identity cards required to vote, although they were not legally qualified to do so because they were not citizens. Meanwhile, Haratine (Arab slave descendants) and sub-Saharan (non-Arab) citizens often had great difficulty obtaining national identity documents.

Racial and cultural tension and discrimination also arose from the geographic, linguistic, and cultural divides between Moors (Beydane and Haratine) who--while historically representing a mix of Berber, Arab, and sub-Saharan Africans--today largely identify culturally and linguistically as Arab, and the sub-Saharan non-Arab minorities. Historically, the Beydane (“White Moors”) enslaved the Haratine population (“Black Moors”); some hereditary slavery continued, and Haratines continued to suffer from the legacy of centuries of slavery (see section 7.b.). Beydane tribes and clans dominated positions in government and business far beyond their proportion of the population. As a group the Haratines remained politically and economically weaker than the Beydane, although they represented the largest ethnocultural group in the country. The various sub-Saharan ethnic groups, along with the Haratines, remained underrepresented in leadership positions in government, industry, and the military (see section 3). In August, President Ghazouani increased the number of Haratines and sub-Saharans in leadership positions, most notably by appointing a Haratine as prime minister. In November the Union for the Republic, the ruling political party, held a series of workshops and debates designed to identify ways to bolster national unity. The workshops marked the first time that the ruling party began to debate openly ways to overcome some of the country’s racial and cultural tensions, and included proposals to change some of the religious jurisprudence books that form the basis

of religious teachings and are used to justify the practice of slavery.

According to human rights activists and press reports, local authorities continued to allow influential Beydane to appropriate land formerly occupied by Haratines and sub-Saharanans, to occupy property unlawfully taken from sub-Saharanans by former governments, and to obstruct access to water and pasturage.

## **Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

No laws protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons from discrimination. Under sharia as applied in the country, consensual same-sex sexual activity between men is punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals, and such activity between women is punishable by three months to two years in prison and a token fine. The government did not actively enforce these measures. The LGBTI community was rarely identified or discussed, which observers attributed to the severity of the stigma and the legal penalties attached to such labels.

According to the latest report by the LGBTI Nouakchott Group of Solidarity Association (issued in 2017), the rights of LGBTI persons are not recognized and therefore not protected. LGBTI persons lived in perpetual fear of being driven out by their families and rejected by society in general. As a result, they did not attend or participate in public activities due to fears of retribution and violence. On January 30, eight men were convicted and sentenced to two years for disturbing public morals after video circulated of a celebration at a private Nouakchott party involving mostly LGBTI men. In March the Nouakchott Appeals Court dropped the initial charges and ordered the release of seven of the eight men. The remaining man was sentenced to two months in prison for disturbing the peace.

## **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

Persons infected with HIV/AIDS were often isolated due to societal taboos and prejudice associated with the disease but were gradually becoming more accepted within society and by the government. These individuals were often involved in the implementation of state programs to combat infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS,



malaria, and tuberculosis.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The law allows all workers, except members of police, armed forces, and foreign and migrant workers, to form and join independent unions of their choice at local and national levels and provides for the right to conduct legal strikes and to bargain collectively. Other provisions and laws severely restrict or excessively regulate these rights. The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws, and penalties were not commensurate with penalties for similar violations of laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

Prior authorization or approval by authorities is required before a union may be recognized. The public prosecutor must authorize all trade unions before they enjoy legal status. The public prosecutor may provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization if ministry officials believe the union has not complied with the law. The law also provides that authorities may initiate legal proceedings against union leaders who undermine public order or make false statements. This law in effect authorizes administrative authorities to dissolve, suspend, or deregister trade union organizations by unilateral decision.

Noncitizens do not have the right to become trade union officials unless they have worked in the country and in the profession represented by the trade union for at least five years. Labor unions must obtain government authorization in order to hold labor elections. Despite previous promises, the government has not authorized union elections since 2014.

Bargaining collectively at the national level requires previous authorization or approval by the president, who decides how collective bargaining is organized. No such authorization is required for collective bargaining at the company level. The minister of labor, public service, and modernization of the administration may call for bargaining among employers, employees, labor unions, and the government. In addition the ministry is entitled to take part in the preparation of collective

agreements. The law provides that the meeting must occur 15 days following a statement of nonagreement between parties.

The law provides for the right to strike, except for those working in services deemed essential. Aggrieved parties must follow complex procedures before conducting a strike action. If negotiations between workers and employers fail to produce an agreement, the case is referred to the Court of Arbitration. If the court fails to broker a mutually satisfactory agreement, workers may have to wait up to four additional months from the time of the decision before they can legally strike. The government may also dissolve a union for what it considers an illegal or politically motivated strike. The law prohibits workers from holding sit-ins or blocking nonstriking workers from entering work premises. Workers must provide advance notice of at least 10 working days to the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration for any strike.

The government did not enforce the law effectively and did not provide adequate resources for inspections. While authorities seldom punished violators, on several occasions the government ordered the reinstatement of workers who were wrongfully terminated or directed companies to improve employee benefits and services. While antiunion discrimination is illegal, national human rights groups and unions reported authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not fully respected, although unions exercised their right to organize workers during the year. Collective bargaining at the company level, however, was rare. On February 5, longshoremen of the Autonomous Port of Nouakchott went on strike to demand the full implementation of agreements reached during a previous strike in 2018. According to the Mauritanian Workers' Free Confederation, authorities dismissed thousands of longshoremen in 2018 without giving them their rights, adding that the walkout came in response to the "arbitrary policies and decisions" taken against the carriers.

Registration and strike procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor ministry officials routinely issued notices calling on all parties to negotiate. Such notices legally restrict workers from striking for a period of four months.

Workers and unions organized several strikes and, unlike in previous years, authorities only occasionally employed force to disperse them.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law prohibits most forms of forced or compulsory labor, including by children. It also criminalizes the practice of slavery, which includes forced labor and forced child labor, and imposes penalties, both on government officials who do not take action in response to reported cases and on those who benefit from contracting forced labor. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. The constitution and law make the offense “a crime against humanity.” The law grants civil society organizations the right to file complaints in court on behalf of victims as civil parties; however, many civil society organizations reported difficulty in filing complaints on behalf of victims. The law also provides free legal assistance for victims and refers to their right to compensation. Although the government is taking more steps towards ending the practice of slavery, including increased engagement with civil society groups, efforts to enforce the antislavery law were considered inadequate.

The General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion, or Taazour, was created in 2019 to intensify government efforts to combat slavery and address the social and economic conditions that have left many citizens vulnerable to forced labor. With a budget of 20 billion ouguiyas (\$541.5 million) over the next five years, Taazour is implementing projects to improve living conditions and provide skills to members of historically marginalized communities. The institution has the authority to coordinate projects of other government agencies in order to maximize their impact. Taazour has an agreement with the CNDH to facilitate efforts by beneficiaries of Taazour projects to seek redress for any violation of their civil rights.

Only registered human rights associations that have been legally operating for five years can file criminal cases on behalf of former slaves. During the year the government continued to prevent the registration of certain antislavery organizations and associations that work for the promotion and protection of the Haratine community; these include former slave groups that would have been able

to submit complaints once their five-year probationary period had expired.

As of December, IRA, created in 2008 and one of the most active organizations fighting slavery in the country, continued to be prevented from registering. The government's refusal to register IRA and other human rights NGOs who could help to file complaints on behalf of slavery victims was a contributing factor to the underutilization of the three Specialized Antislavery Courts.

On June 29, the Nema special court ruled on two slavery-related cases. The court ruled that the first case lacked evidence and determined that the case was not slavery related. The second case filed by SOS Esclaves involved a slavery-like practice; however, the court decided to postpone the hearing until the next scheduled court session in order to conduct a more thorough investigation. The Nema special court recommenced operations on November 12 but still did not rule on the second case. On December 3, the Nouadhibou Antislavery Court ruled on three cases, sentencing three persons in absentia to 20 years' imprisonment and imposing a substantial fine as compensation for the victims. The Nouakchott special court briefly began hearings in December before quickly closing again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception of the June 29 ruling in the Nema special court, the specialized anti-slavery courts stopped hearing cases from March to November along with the rest of the judicial system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Slavery and slavery-like practices, which typically flowed from ancestral master-slave relationships and involved both adults and children, continued. Although reliable data on the total number of slaves does not exist, local and international experts agreed hereditary slavery and slavery-like conditions affected a substantial portion of the population in both rural and urban settings. Enslaved persons suffered from traditional chattel slavery, including forced labor and forced sexual exploitation. Human rights groups reported that masters coerced persons in slavery and slavery-like relationships to deny to human rights activists that such exploitative relationships existed.

In 2015 the government asked the International Labor Organization (ILO) for a program to assess the scope of forced labor in the country. Among other activities, the Bridge Project supports research in the country on recruitment mechanisms and

employment conditions to help identify different types of employment that may involve slavery or slavery-like practices. Most of the Bridge Project's activities were postponed starting in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In September the project was extended to November 2021.

Former slaves and their descendants remained in a dependent status vis-a-vis their former slave masters due to a variety of factors, including cultural traditions, a lack of marketable skills, poverty, and persistent drought. Some former slaves and descendants of slaves were forced to revert to a de facto slave status by working for their former masters in exchange for some combination of lodging, food, and medical care. Some former slaves reportedly continued to work for their former masters or others under exploitative conditions to retain access to land that they traditionally farmed. Although the law provides for distribution of land to the landless, including to former slaves, authorities rarely enforced the law.

Former slaves in subservient circumstances were also vulnerable to mistreatment. Women with children faced particular difficulties. Because they were particularly vulnerable and lacked the resources to live independently from their former masters, they could be compelled to remain in a condition of servitude, performing domestic duties, tending fields, or herding animals without remuneration.

Some former slaves were coerced into continuing to work for their former masters, who relied on adherence to religious teachings and a fear of divine punishment to keep these individuals enslaved. Former slaves were often subjected to social discrimination and limited to performing manual labor in markets, ports, and airports.

Slavery, including forced labor and de facto slavery, were more prevalent in areas where educational levels were generally low or a barter economy still prevailed, and prevalent to a lesser degree in urban centers, including Nouakchott. The practices commonly occurred where there was a need for workers to herd livestock, tend fields, and do other manual or household labor. Nevertheless, such practices also occurred in urban centers where young children, often girls, were retained as unpaid domestic servants (see section 7.c.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law forbids some, but not all of, the worst forms of child labor. The law sets the minimum age for employment at 16. Nevertheless, it allows children as young as 12 to be employed in most forms of family enterprise with authorization from the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration, as long as the work does not affect the child's health, exceed two hours per day, or occur during school hours or holidays. The law states employed children between ages 14 and 16 should receive 70 percent of the minimum wage and those who are 17 should receive 90 percent of the minimum wage. Children should not work more than eight hours a day, should be given one or several one-hour breaks, and may not work at night. Children working in unpaid, temporary, or noncontractual work do not have the same protections under the child labor laws and regulations as do children working in contractual employment.

The Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration authorized children as young as 13 to do work in a variety of areas, resulting in children doing hazardous work by government authorization in the areas of agriculture, fishing, construction, and garbage removal. Additionally, the government does not legally prohibit all forms of hazardous work as defined by international law.

The law increases the penalties associated with violations of child labor laws and criminalizes commercial sexual exploitation of children and forced begging. It also increases the prison term for trafficking children. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. The penalties were generally insufficiently enforced to deter violations. The law does not prohibit hazardous occupations and activities in all relevant child labor sectors, including domestic work and agriculture. The law prohibits the use of children for illicit activities, such as the production and trafficking of drugs.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. Mechanisms for exchanging information among agencies or assessing the effectiveness of child labor laws were not active during the year. There was no specific mechanism for submitting

complaints, other than to labor inspectors or the Special Police Brigade for Minors. NGOs were the only organizations that handled cases of child victims, referred them to the Special Police Brigade for Minors, and pressured the government to adjudicate the cases or integrate the victims in social centers or schools during the year.

The CNDH's 2016 annual report, which had the most recent numbers available, stated that 26 percent of children between the ages of 15 and 17 worked. The report indicated the proportion of children between the ages of 12 and 14 who performed some work increased to 22 percent. The report also stressed that exploitation of girls was more frequent in domestic work.

An unknown number of *talibes* (religious students), nearly all from the Halpulaar community, begged in the streets and gave the proceeds to their religious teachers as payment for religious instruction. There were reliable reports that some *marabouts* (religious teachers) forced their talibes to beg for more than 12 hours a day and provided them with insufficient food and shelter. The government continued a program to reduce the number of talibes and cooperated with NGOs to provide talibes with basic medical and nutritional care.

Child labor in the informal sector was common and a significant problem, particularly in poorer urban areas. Several reports suggested girls as young as age seven, mainly from remote regions, were forced to work as unpaid domestic servants in wealthy urban homes. Young children in the countryside were commonly engaged in cattle and goat herding, cultivation of subsistence crops, fishing, and other agricultural labor in support of their families. Young children in urban areas often drove donkey carts, delivered water and building materials, and were very active in garbage collection. Street gang leaders occasionally forced children to steal, beg, and sell drugs. In keeping with longstanding tradition, many children also served apprenticeships in small-scale industries, such as metalworking, carpentry, vehicle repair, masonry, and the informal sector.

The government continued to operate seven Centers for Protection and Social Integration of Children in Difficult Situations: one in each of the regions of Kiffa,

Nouadhibou, Aleg, and Rosso, and three in Nouakchott.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings> and the Department of Labor's *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods>.

#### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, disability, religion, political opinion, national origin, citizenship, social origin, sexual orientation or gender identity, age, or language, but the government often did not enforce the law. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to race and language. For example in conformity with long-standing practice, the advancement of both Haratines and sub-Saharanans in the armed services remained limited.

The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. The two largest employers, the civil service and the state mining company, observed this law; most employers in the private sector reportedly did not. In the modern wage sector, women also received family benefits, including three months of paid maternity leave. Women faced widespread employment discrimination, because employers usually preferred to hire men, with women overrepresented in low-paying positions (see section 6). There were known legal restrictions on women's employment, including limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous or morally inappropriate and certain industries including mining and construction.

#### **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

The law provides for a national minimum wage that is more than the most recent estimate for the poverty income level. The law provides that the standard legal nonagricultural workweek must not exceed either 40 hours or six days unless there is overtime compensation, which is to be paid at rates graduated according to the number of supplemental hours worked. Domestic workers and certain other



categories could work 56 hours per week. The law provides that all employees must be given at least one 24-hour rest period per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime.

The government sets health and safety standards, and in principle workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment; however, this was rarely applied. The law applies to all workers in the formal economy, and the labor code applies to all formal workers regardless of nationality. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations.

The Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration is responsible for enforcing labor laws but did not do so effectively. The ILO reported that a significant pay gap between staff in the labor inspectorate and staff in other government inspection departments who receive better remuneration (such as tax inspectors or education inspectors) led to attrition of personnel. The number of labor inspectors, however, was sufficient for the labor force. The ILO also reported that the labor inspectorate was subject to undue influence by employers and the government, thereby reducing the effectiveness of inspection activity.

The majority of the working population labored in the informal sector, primarily in subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. According to the General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers, only 25 percent of workers filled positions accorded regular pay.

Despite the law, labor unions pointed to conditions approaching forced labor in several sectors, including the food processing industry. In these sectors workers did not have contracts or receive pay stubs. Their salaries were below the official minimum wage, and they worked in unfavorable conditions. They occasionally did not receive pay for several months.

Working conditions in the fishing industry were similarly difficult. Commercial fishermen reportedly often exceeded 40 hours of work per week without receiving overtime pay. Additionally, some factory workers employed by fish-processing plants and boat manufacturers did not receive contracts guaranteeing the terms of

their employment. Government inspections of fishing vessels, processing plants, and boat factories were rare.

Violations of minimum wage or overtime laws were frequent in many sectors but more common in the informal economy, which includes domestic service, street vending, artisanal fishing, garbage collection, bus fare collection, donkey-cart driving, apprenticeship, auto repair, and other similar types of employment. The National Agency of Social Security registered 204 workplace fatalities or injuries during the year, which was comparable with previous years.