

MAURITANIA 2021 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. 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 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. The National Guard performs a limited police function in keeping with its peacetime role as the guarantor of physical security at government facilities, including prisons. The National Guard reports to the Ministry of the Interior. 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'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. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including criminal blasphemy laws; serious government corruption; lack of investigation and accountability for gender-based violence;

trafficking in persons, including continued existence of slavery and slavery-related practices; crimes involving violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; existence of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and 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 some officials frequently acted with impunity. Civil society organizations objected to the scant number of indictments handed down by authorities. The government also continued to take steps to investigate, prosecute, and punish officials involved in corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

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

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

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 and law prohibit such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

According to the Conduct in UN Field Missions online portal, there were two allegations submitted in 2020 of sexual exploitation and abuse by the country's peacekeepers deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic. Both cases involved transactional sex with an adult, and as of October, investigations into both remained pending.

The National Mechanism for Prevention of Torture (MNP) is an independent governmental body charged with investigating credible allegations of torture. 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 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations pointed out their continued usage. Neither the MNP nor the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) directly addressed the existence of these locations.

Impunity was a serious problem in the security forces, particularly among the General Group for Road Safety, the National Guard, and the National Police. Politicization, widespread corruption, and ethnic tensions between the Beydane-controlled security forces and Haratine (“Black Moor” Arab slave descendants) and sub-Saharan communities were primary factors contributing to impunity. Cases of abuse were routinely handled within the security forces, but authorities took steps to refer cases to the criminal courts. For example, on February 11, authorities sentenced a police commissioner to five years in prison after he assaulted a judge.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

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

Physical Conditions: Prisons remained overcrowded. For example, the Directorate of Penal Affairs and Prison Administration (DAPAP) maintained that the country’s largest prison, Dar Naim, held approximately three times the number of inmates compared to its capacity. Authorities frequently grouped pretrial detainees with convicts who presented a danger to other prisoners. Male guards frequently monitored female inmates, a practice criticized by the CNDH.

On July 9, DAPAP announced the death of Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, a prisoner at the Aleg national prison. Although DAPAP attributed Abdel-Rahman’s death to natural causes, they noted that his frequent prison transfers may have had adverse

effects on his health. DAPAP's announcement came after prisoners in Aleg rioted to protest Abdel-Rahman's death. There was no further investigation into the incident at year's end.

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 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 sometimes 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 jailed on terrorism-related charges alleged mistreatment at the Central Civil Prison of Nouakchott. Local NGOs reported that inmates partially managed one wing of the Dar Naim prison by themselves from January to July, a practice not uncommon in the region but with which DAPAP expressed unease. 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.

The Ministry of Justice operated a youth detention center in Nouakchott. The

detention facility held 70 minors during the year. 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 for dealing with the prison administration, and prisoners occasionally made use of this opportunity. The government acknowledged allegations of inhuman conditions but rarely took corrective action. Authorities routinely transferred prisoners to prisons in the interior of the country to alleviate the overcrowding in Nouakchott and to allow for renovation projects in the Nouakchott prisons; however, these transfers often meant that prisoners were separated from their families and legal representatives and increased the average length of time prisoners were held in pretrial detention. There were no reports of concerns in prisons and detention centers regarding prisoners' access to visitors or religious observance.

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. 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 continued implementing 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 and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these prohibitions and rights. 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 the 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 sometimes 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 generally did not respect this right.

During its Universal Periodic Review of the country on January 19, the UN Human Rights Committee noted that 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 interpretation services). On January 6, the government completed staffing for legal aid offices throughout the country. These legal aid offices are provided for by law, and they helped victims and defendants to access the legal resources available to them. Judges sometimes 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.). On April 25, the Nouadhibou police detained four young adults (one woman and three men) who had participated in a social media program called al-Matrush. The content featured the young woman talking about gender equality, female sexuality, and premarital sex. Authorities released the four on April 28, after police allegedly made them promise to stop the program and confiscated their cell phones.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. According to DAPAP the average length for pretrial detention was six to 12 months, and approximately 40 percent of the prison population were pretrial detainees. Members of the security forces sometimes arrested demonstrators and held them longer than the legal maximum time, often due to a 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, although the length of pretrial detention rarely, if ever, equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most jurisdictions stopped processing cases in January and from July through September, and both the rate and length of pretrial detention increased.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government mostly respected 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 generally perceived judges to be corrupt, unskilled, and subject to social and tribal pressures.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Criminal 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 the police investigation was complete. Defendants have the right to be present during their trial. All defendants, including the indigent, have the right to legal counsel, but authorities generally did not respect 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 did not always have access to free interpretation if they could not speak or understand the language of the court. 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. Sharia is, in part, the basis for trial procedures. Courts generally did not 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.

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

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

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

Freedom of Expression: Individuals were generally free to criticize the government publicly but were occasionally subject to retaliation. The constitution and law prohibit racial or ethnic propaganda; however, 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. On December 1, the Nouadhibou Criminal Court sentenced Hamda Ould Obaid Allah to six months in prison for criticizing President Ghazouani in a video that went viral in October. In the video the blogger criticized President Ghazouani’s personal appearance and his management of the country.

On November 9, the government adopted a law criminalizing criticisms and derogatory comments of the country’s national symbols, including the flag, the national anthem, Islam, and the president. The law reinforces and slightly expands previous laws and decrees by including specific references to the use of digital media (e.g., social media, WhatsApp messages, voice messages, and photographs). The law caused widespread controversy prior to its adoption, and many NGOs and human rights activists declared the law unduly restricted freedom of expression.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other 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 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 some coverage of opposition activities and views.

Violence and Harassment: There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists during the year. On April 24, authorities detained Abdallahi Med Atigh after he criticized Minister of Social Affairs Naha Mint Cheikh Sidya. Authorities then released Atigh on April 26 (see also section 5).

Libel/Slander Laws: There is a law against blasphemy, which is punishable by death, although the country last carried out an execution in 1987.

National Security: The government sometimes cited laws protecting national security and social cohesion to detain critics of the government and deter criticism of governmental policies.

Internet Freedom

The government sometimes disrupted access to the internet and sometimes arrested persons for expressing political or religious views online that criticized the government. On September 22 and 23, authorities disrupted internet access in the southern part of the country due to violent protests in the village of Rkiz. On July 26 and 29 and on August 30 and 31, authorities also disrupted the country's 3G network while national exams were taking place. Authorities took this action as part of an annual effort to combat cheating. There was no evidence that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. On February 9, police arrested Bilal Ould Maimoun in Nouadhibou after he shared several Facebook posts criticizing the government's policies for stabilizing food prices. Police released him on February 15.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government sometimes restricted these freedoms. The government, however, took steps to respect increasingly these rights, including by enacting a law that makes it easier for NGOs to register and operate.

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. Security forces were sometimes violent in dispersing protesters. On November 28, security forces in Bababe (a village in the south) violently dispersed a demonstration protesting the 1990 killing of 28 sub-Saharan soldiers. Several persons were injured during the dispersal, including five who were flown to Senegal for medical treatment.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. On January 11, the National Assembly adopted a new Law on Associations (the “NGO Law”), which changed the registration process for NGOs from an authoritative to a declarative system. This new law allows NGOs, including prominent antislavery organizations, to register and operate in the country. The government adopted the implementing decree for NGO law on October 20, and several NGOs, including the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement, were registered under the new law by the end of the year (also see section 7.b.).

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

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

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 refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. Resources provided by the government were inadequate to meet the assistance needs of these populations.

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, although authorities regularly worked with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration to screen for vulnerable migrants prior to deportation.

Access to Basic Services: The government and UNHCR worked together to provide COVID-19 vaccinations to refugees to fight against the pandemic. The government also worked with UNHCR and the Malian government to agree upon a common curriculum for refugee children to allow them to have more access to higher education.

Durable Solutions: The government worked with UNHCR to issue birth certificates to refugee children born in the country. UNHCR reported that ongoing insecurity in Mali and COVID-19 border closures precluded large-scale returns in 2020 and during the year.

g. Stateless Persons

According to the law, children born to citizen fathers and foreign mothers are automatically citizens, whether born inside or outside the country. The law does not grant women the same ability as men to confer nationality to their children when born outside of the country, but those children are able 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. Many Haratine children also faced difficulties obtaining civil status documents since authorities required proof of identity from both parents.

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 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 of political parties to register. By decree all political parties must be able to gain at least 1 percent of votes in two consecutive elections in order to continue to operate legally and receive government funding, and this decree continued to limit the overall number of political parties that can participate. The government did not approve registration for previously denied 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 27 ministers in the sitting cabinet, 18 percent come from a Haratine ethnic background, and 18 percent come from a sub-Saharan ethnic background. Unlike in previous governments, the existing cabinet was 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), 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, compared with 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, none from the Haratine ethnic community, and four from the Beydane (“White Moor”) ethnic community. Traditional and cultural factors also prevented persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons from participating in political life on the same basis as nonminority citizens.

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 numerous reports of government corruption during the year.

Corruption: Corruption was a serious problem in public administration, and the government rarely held officials accountable or prosecuted them for abuses. There were reports government officials 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 March 11, authorities charged former president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and 12 other persons with mismanagement of state property, bribery, illicit enrichment, obstruction of justice, and money laundering. These charges were based on the 2020 Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry that investigated corrupt practices during the previous administration. On May 11, authorities then sent Aziz to prison for breaking the terms of his judicial supervision. Aziz remained in prison for the remainder of the year awaiting his trial on corruption-related charges.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and

Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restrictions, 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.

In May the government welcomed a visit from the Abolition Institute, an antislavery NGO that in 2017 authorities had denied entry to the country. During the May visit, the government allowed the group to freely conduct antislavery activities. 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. On April 16, police detained two representatives of the antislavery NGO SOS Enslaves, one former victim of slavery, and one Swiss journalist. The four individuals had been investigating a possible case of slavery in the northern part of the country. Police released the four persons on April 19, but authorities reportedly kept the journalist's professional equipment due to the journalist's lack of prior authorization to operate the equipment.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Commissariat for Human Rights (CDHAHRSC) designs, promotes, and implements national human rights policies. The CDHAHRSC 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, conducted information caravans throughout the country to combat slavery, and

made recommendations to the government.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

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 was last enforced in 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 rape survivors 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 remained taboo due to social mores and traditional norms, which often called for survivors to be rejected by their family and society. On June 17, three men allegedly raped a mother and her two daughters in Nouakchott. Police arrested the three suspects, and they remained in pretrial detention at year's end.

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 survivors 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 due to lack of awareness regarding the ordinance in the law that bans the practice and traditional and religious beliefs supporting the practice. According to a 2015 UNICEF study, 67 percent of women ages 15 to 49 had undergone FGM/C, and the study found that in certain regions the prevalence was higher than 90 percent. On February 6, Minister of Social Affairs Naha Mint Cheikh Sidya stated the rate had fallen to 53 percent for girls younger than 14.

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 to ensure that the providers would 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*. The practice forced some girls to eat up to 16,000 calories a day for two months, with refusals to eat often accompanied by physical punishments from family members.

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: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities. According to NGOs, doctors continued to perform so-called virginity tests, particularly in cases of rape and sexual violence.

According to the law, married couples have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children. Single pregnant woman, however, do not enjoy the same freedoms, since the law criminalizes sexual relations outside of marriage.

Social and cultural barriers significantly limited access to contraception, including misinformation 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, stigma impeded access to contraception. 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 ages 15-49, with any method, was 12 percent.

According to the law, women have 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 for adolescents.

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 emergency contraception 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 by their immediate family from seeking assistance after incidents of sexual violence.

In 2017 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 a lack of medical equipment, few programs promoting prenatal care for mothers, 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. (See the Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) subsection for additional information.) The WHO estimated the adolescent (females ages 15-19) birth rate to be 84 per 1,000.

Girls' access to education was affected by pregnancy and motherhood status, since many girls who became pregnant dropped out of school to care for their child.

Discrimination: Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and the more educated and urbanized women 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 are legal restrictions on women's employment, including limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous and certain industries including mining and construction.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The law provides that all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity, are equal. Nevertheless, Haratines (the “Black Moors” and former slave caste) and sub-Saharanans often faced discrimination from the country's Beydane community. Police often tolerated discrimination towards the Haratines and sub-Saharanans since the security services were largely controlled by Beydane.

Haratine and sub-Saharan ethnic groups faced governmental discrimination while the Beydane ethnic group received governmental preference. For example, individuals living across the border 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). President Ghazouani increased the number of Haratines and sub-Saharanans in leadership

positions, most notably by appointing a Haratine as prime minister.

From June through September, the Union for the Republic, the country's ruling political party, held a series of workshops and debates throughout the country to address the issue of national cohesion and slavery. The workshops marked the first time that the ruling party began to openly discuss ways to overcome some of the country's racial and cultural tensions.

The government took steps to mitigate the economic factors that contributed to the problem. For example, 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 left many citizens vulnerable to forced labor. With a budget of 20 billion ouguiyas (\$541 million) through 2024, Taazour was implementing projects to improve living conditions and provide skills to members of historically marginalized communities. The institution had the authority to coordinate projects of other government agencies in order to maximize their impact. Taazour had an agreement with the CNDH to facilitate efforts by beneficiaries of Taazour projects to seek redress for any abuse of their civil rights.

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 Abuse: There are laws against child abuse, although authorities rarely applied them. Authorities also rarely investigated allegations of child abuse in homes or schools.

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. NGOs asserted the laws were not properly enforced.

Displaced Children: According to a 2019 statement by the minister of social affairs, there were more than 16,000 children who needed protection, including displaced children.

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

Persons with disabilities generally did not have access to education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. 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.

There were no confirmed reports of violence, harassment, intimidation, or other abuses against persons with disabilities during the year.

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. Although the law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, private discrimination in employment and occupation, housing, and health care was common. Children with disabilities attended school through secondary education at a significantly lower rate than other children.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Persons with HIV and 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 increasingly consulted to help implement state programs to combat infectious disease, including HIV and AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.

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

LGBTQI+ persons were reportedly harassed and were subject to violence from the National Police, the general Group for Road Safety, neighbors, and family members. On October 21, a video circulated on WhatsApp showing several road

safety police harassing a transgender person. During the video, which appeared to be filmed by one of the officers, police began stripping the person, and officers can be heard saying they were going to investigate the woman's "fake breasts." There were no reports that authorities launched an investigation into the incident.

No laws protect LGBTQI+ persons from discrimination. Under sharia as applied in the country, consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men is punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals, and such conduct between women is punishable by three months to two years in prison and a token monetary fine. The government did not actively enforce these measures. The LGBTQI+ 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 LGBTQI+ Nouakchott Solidarity Association from 2017, the rights of LGBTQI+ persons were not recognized and therefore not protected. LGBTQI+ persons lived in perpetual fear of being expelled from their families, had difficulty finding employment, and were rejected by society in general. As a result they did not attend or participate in public activities due to fears of retribution and violence.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Similar to other minority groups, the law protects persons with albinism from discrimination, but authorities did not enforce the law. Persons with albinism were reportedly discriminated against in the workplace, and employers tended not to hire persons with albinism. This practice was particularly prevalent in the service and restaurant industry.

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.

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 if ministry officials believe the union did not comply 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 had 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 for any strike.

The government did not enforce the law effectively and did not provide adequate

resources for inspections. While authorities seldom punished violators, the government ordered the reinstatement of workers who were wrongfully terminated or directed companies to improve employee benefits and services on several occasions. While antiunion discrimination is illegal, national human rights groups and unions reported authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms. Collective bargaining at the company level remained rare. In May longshoremen, however, reached an agreement with the Autonomous Port of Nouakchott after they went on strike in 2020 to protest the dismissal of thousands of dock workers during a previous strike in 2018.

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 did not employ 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 act 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 took more steps towards ending the practice of slavery, including increased engagement with civil society groups, efforts to enforce the antislavery law were considered inadequate by NGOs and human rights activists. The government doubled the budget for the antislavery courts from 900,000 ouguiyas (\$24,300) to 1,800,000 ouguiyas (\$48,600) during the year, but the courts still lacked adequate funding to carry out their mandate.

On January 13, the prime minister gave the CDHAHRSC the power to introduce

cases on behalf of victims of slavery, although the CDHAHRSC had not yet used this authority. The new NGO law does not allow for NGOs to introduce cases on behalf of victims, although several antislavery organizations continued to do so throughout the year.

On December 31, the government used the new NGO law to officially recognize the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement, which was created in 2008 and was one of the most active organizations fighting slavery in the country.

On April 13, the Nema specialized antislavery court ruled on one slavery-related case. The court acquitted Habibi Ould Murtadja, a 64-year-old man accused of slavery and child labor, due to lack of evidence. On June 8, the Nouakchott antislavery court ruled on four cases of slavery-related slander, a crime punishable under the law, and sentenced one person to six months in prison but suspended the sentence. The three other cases were either dismissed or postponed. The specialized antislavery courts, like the rest of the judicial system, were closed in January and from July through September because of 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 did not exist, local and international experts agreed hereditary slavery and slavery-like conditions affected a small but not insignificant 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 ILO Bridge Project supported 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.

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 if 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 authorized children as young as 13 to do work in a variety of areas, resulting in children doing hazardous work with 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 penalizes violations of child labor laws and criminalizes commercial sexual exploitation of children and forced begging. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations, and 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 totaled 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 collected garbage. 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 generally did not enforce the law. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. For

example, in conformity with long-standing practice, the employment and advancement of both Haratines and sub-Saharanans in the armed services, the National Police, and civil administrative jobs remained limited. On July 27, the government enacted a dual nationality law that allows dual citizens to work in the government and participate in political life. The new law does not allow for dual citizens to run for president or become the prime minister, the president of the national assembly, or a minister of sovereignty (i.e., minister of foreign affairs, defense, Islamic affairs, or interior).

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 are 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

Wage and Hour Laws: 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 per week. Domestic workers and certain other categories may work 56 hours per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime.

The Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing labor laws but did not do so effectively. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient for the labor force, and inspectors have the authority to make unannounced inspections. The ILO reported that the labor inspectorate was subject to undue influence by employers and the government, thereby reducing the effectiveness of inspection activity.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government sets occupational health and safety (OSH) standards, and in principle workers have the right to remove

themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment; however, this was rarely applied. These OSH standards apply only to the formal sector, and labor inspectors rarely identified unsafe conditions or responded to workers' OSH complaints.

The Ministry of Labor was responsible for ensuring OSH standards. Inspections for OSH were conducted by the same inspectors under the same authorities as wage and hours. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws, and penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. The National Agency of Social Security registered 168 workplace fatalities or injuries during the year, most of which occurred in the mining sector.

Informal Sector: The majority of the working population labored in the informal sector, primarily in subsistence agriculture, fishing, domestic services, 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 included domestic service, street vending, artisanal fishing, garbage collection, bus fare collection, donkey-cart driving, apprenticeship, auto repair, and other similar types of employment.