

Mauritania 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Mauritania during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests of journalists and enforcement of a criminal blasphemy law to limit expression; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; serious government corruption; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation/cutting, and other forms of such violence; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, which were not enforced; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor.

The government took steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who may have committed abuses, but some officials 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

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

There were several reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year. On February 9, local media reported the killing of well-known human rights activist Soufi Ould Cheine while in detention at Nouakchott's Dar Naim 2 police station. On February 12, the public prosecutor announced autopsy results confirming that Cheine, a member of the Haratine community that was historically exploited in slavery, sustained fractured cervical vertebrae and indicia of strangulation, noting these injuries were likely the result of police brutality. Authorities arrested and formally charged the *police commissaire* and seven other officers present at the police station the night of the killing. Three other individuals were placed under judicial supervision. On September 14, the Nouakchott Criminal Court referred the 11 individuals to trial, which had not been scheduled at year's end.

On May 28, police arrested Oumar Diop in Nouakchott alleging that Diop, a member of the minority sub-Saharan Peul community, was engaged in a physical altercation with two other persons before he was arrested. Several

hours after the arrest, police informed Diop's relative he had died from health complications while in police custody. Following news of Diop's death, protests in several cities decried police brutality and discrimination against the country's Black population. The prosecutor's office requested an independent autopsy by a forensic expert based in Morocco, who concluded Diop died of a heart attack with acute damage to the central nervous system related to use of cocaine and alcohol. Following the autopsy, prosecutors closed the case with no charges filed. Diop's family contested the autopsy results and claimed police killed Diop.

On May 30, police shot and killed Mohamed Lemine Ould Samba, a member of the Haratine community, while he was participating in a protest following the death of Oumar Diop. According to police, Samba attempted to forcefully enter a police station and an officer shot him in response. On June 2, a prosecutor instructed municipal services to bury Samba without the consent of his family. Samba's family stated they would continue to seek justice despite government pressure to accept financial compensation from the state to close the case. Authorities did not conduct an official investigation into Samba's death.

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, and Other Related Abuses

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports that government officials employed them.

The National Mechanism for Prevention of Torture (MNPT), an independent government body charged with investigating allegations of torture, conducted regular visits to prisons and police stations. Following an investigation into the detention conditions of Soufi Ould Cheine, on February 14 the MNPT declared his death was a result of physical abuse and torture.

On May 8, a video widely distributed on social media showed two police officers violently beating a youth in front of a large group at a beach in Nouakchott. The government did not take any action to punish the alleged perpetrators of this violence.

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, although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations pointed out their continued usage. Neither the MNPT nor the independent National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) directly addressed the existence of these locations.

Impunity was a serious problem within 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 security forces controlled by Beydane, ethnic Arabs known locally as “White Moors,” and Haratine and other Black sub-Saharan communities were primary factors contributing to impunity. Cases of abuse were routinely investigated internally by security forces themselves without referring them to judicial authorities, indicating a certain level of impunity within security forces. Nonetheless, authorities sometimes took steps to refer cases to criminal courts.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening primarily due to gross overcrowding and inadequate sanitary conditions.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prisons remained severely overcrowded. For example, the Directorate of Penal Affairs and Prison Administration maintained that the country’s largest prison, Dar Naim, held approximately three times the number of inmates than its designed capacity.

Poor plumbing contributed to the inadequate sanitary conditions. In some institutions, including Dar Naim prison, toilets were unusable, and inmates used containers to relieve themselves.

Administration: Authorities permitted prisoners to file allegations of abuse with the CNDH and the MNPT. The government typically investigated these

allegations. Government regulations also allowed inmates to elect one representative for dealing with the prison administration, and prisoners occasionally made use of this opportunity.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted prison and detention center visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The CNDH and MNPT conducted regular as well as unannounced visits to prisons and detention centers.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law required that a suspect be brought before a judicial officer and charged with a crime within 48 hours; authorities generally did not respect this right. With few exceptions, individuals could not be detained for more than 48 hours without evidence, although prosecutors could extend the period for an additional 48 hours in some cases. Because nonbusiness days were not counted within this 48-hour maximum period, police sometimes arrested individuals on a Wednesday or Thursday to keep them in custody for a longer period. Persons detained on terrorism charges could be held in

custody for as long as 45 days. Only after the prosecutor submitted charges did a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. By law, indigent defendants were entitled to an attorney at state expense, but legal representation was frequently either unavailable or attorneys did not speak the defendant's language and defendants were not always provided interpretation services. Legal aid offices were provided for by law and helped victims and defendants access available legal resources. 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.

On April 20, police arrested investigative journalist Saleck Zeid following a Facebook post in which he criticized security forces for their inefficiency. On April 24, he was released without charges after being forced to delete his posting.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, and the government generally 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 provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. Defendants, including the indigent, had the right to legal counsel, but authorities generally did not respect this right.

Defendants did not always have access to free interpretation in courts. Where free interpretation was available, it was often of poor quality or not to the standards of professional legal translation. Legal aid and lawyer services were often not easily accessible to persons from the country's primarily Black marginalized communities.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

f. Transnational Repression

Not applicable.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

Not applicable.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family,

Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibited such actions, but there were numerous reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions. For example, authorities reportedly 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 provided 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 prohibited 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 underrepresentation in government of marginalized populations, particularly Haratines and sub-Saharan groups. On July 26, police arrested and detained opposition blogger Hameda Abdellahi after a Facebook Live

streaming in which he criticized the government. Hameda was released after four days in custody. Following his release, he continued to post similar content on Facebook Live posts.

In 2021, the government adopted a law criminalizing criticism and derogatory comments of the country's national symbols, including the flag, the national anthem, Islam, and the president. The law reinforced and expanded 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. On July 22, parliamentarian Mohamed Bouya Ould Cheikh Mohamed Fadel read aloud in parliament text attributed to Maria Loubeid, a student detained on blasphemy charges after she wrote critical words regarding the Prophet Muhammad in her national exam document. In his remarks, Bouya replaced the name of the Prophet Muhammad with that of the president to evoke a response from his fellow parliamentarians, accusing them of being more inclined to tolerate insults against Muhammad than those against the president. On July 31, parliament lifted his immunity and police arrested him for contravening the symbols law. Bouya was granted provisional release on November 2.

Violence and Harassment: Some journalists were subjected to violence, harassment, or intimidation by authorities. There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists during the year.

Libel/Slander Laws: The law prohibited blasphemy, which was punishable by death, although the government had never carried out the death penalty for the crime. On July 3, during the grading of an exam attributed to Maria Loubeid, a Haratine student, the examiner read and later published on social media her essay text that contained alleged insults to the Prophet Muhammad. The post went viral, and many Muslim leaders demanded that the identity of the author be revealed and legal action be taken. On July 18, Atar police arrested Loubeid as the suspected author of the text. On July 26, she was charged with “offending the Prophet” and “use of social media to harm the fundamental and sacred principles of Islam.” She remained in detention awaiting trial at year’s end.

Actions to Expand Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media: The government increased the fund dedicated to support media outlets from 20 million ouguiya (\$512,800) to 33.8 million ouguiya (\$888,300), distributed among 362 media outlets. The government opened these funds to newspapers, radio stations, private TV stations, and websites; the government previously gave these funds only to newspapers.

Internet Freedom

The government sometimes disrupted access to the internet and arrested persons for expressing political or religious views online that criticized the government. Most of the activists and journalists were arrested based on the content of their social media postings. From March 6 to 12, the

government shut down the internet due to security concerns following the escape of four terrorists from Nouakchott's central prison. On May 31, the government cut the internet for several days during protests following the death of Oumar Diop. Also, from June 19 to 22 and July 24 to 25, authorities imposed intermittent cuts to combat cheating during national school exams. On several occasions, the government forced individuals to remove posts on social media that they deemed in violation of the symbols law.

There was no evidence the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provided for freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government sometimes restricted these freedoms.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provided for freedom of peaceful assembly and the government generally respected this right. The law required NGO organizers to apply for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Authorities usually granted permission but, on some occasions, denied it for reasons that NGOs claimed were politically motivated. Security forces were sometimes violent in dispersing protesters. In the wake of Oumar Diop's death, protesters demonstrated in several cities, and the army and National Guard were deployed to restore public order.

On May 24, police forcefully broke up a peaceful sit-in in front of a police station following the arrest of an NGO organizer, detaining 19 persons.

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

In-country Movement: NGOs reported persons without identity cards could not travel freely in some regions, particularly Nouakchott. Government security and safety measures included frequent use of mobile roadblocks where gendarmes, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers.

e. 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 did not provide for granting of asylum or refugee status. UNHCR carried out refugee status determinations under its mandate and then presented cases to the National Consultative Commission on Refugees for recognition.

In accordance with international agreements on freedom of movement, the government allowed nationals of West African states to remain in the country for up to three months, after which they were required to apply for residency or work permits.

Under a 2003 agreement with Spain, authorities received deported migrants, including its citizens and third-country nationals, presumed to have transited the country en route to Spain's Canary Islands. The government immediately processed and transported these migrants to the Senegal and Mali borders without systematically screening for vulnerabilities or allowing international organizations to offer protective services. Authorities were, however, reportedly responsive to international organization requests for screening when civil society actors identified potential victims among the migrants.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: There were allegations authorities detained some migrants without due process, placed unaccompanied

children in detention with adults, abused migrants during arrest and detention, and failed to provide access to adequate facilities, including food and sanitation.

Access to Basic Services: All refugees received a UNHCR identity card that, in principle, allowed them to work, obtain a SIM card, and rent an apartment, among other benefits, but some documented refugees reported they could not always access employment or other public services.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Not applicable.

g. Stateless Persons

The country contributed to statelessness, including through discriminatory denationalization and with birth registration problems. Thousands of sub-Saharanans who were returned to the country from Senegal following their mass expulsion between 1989 and 1991 were legally stateless. Many children born out of wedlock faced difficulties obtaining civil status documents, since authorities required proof of identity from both parents. Child and women survivors of hereditary slavery were especially impacted, and some were unable to comply with legal requirements to establish paternity and obtain civil registration. In July, the government launched a

registration campaign to allow unregistered persons to receive civil status papers before the campaign closed on December 31. The campaign aimed to reach more than 100 communities across the country, particularly in remote locations. As of November, the government reported it had registered more than 320,000 previously undocumented individuals, and estimated there were several hundred thousand individuals remaining to be registered.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution provided 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

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: National elections were widely reported by international observers to be generally fair and free of major abuses and irregularities.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were some restrictions on the ability of political parties to register. By law all registered political parties were required to obtain at least 1 percent of votes in two consecutive elections to continue to operate legally and receive government

funding, and this decree continued to limit the overall number of political parties that could participate in the political process. As a result, the number of political parties dropped from 25 to 20 following the May elections.

Two political parties, the Progressive Forces for Change and the Rally for Global Action, claimed they had complied with all administrative requirements to register, but both parties remained unregistered.

The government took some steps, including the adoption of affirmative action policies, to address the ethnic disparity in political leadership. The Beydane accounted for an estimated 30 percent of the population but occupied approximately 80 percent or more 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 but accounted for fewer than 10 percent of leadership positions.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable

Groups: Traditional and cultural factors restricted women from participating in political life on an equal basis with men. Traditional and cultural factors also prevented persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons from participating in political life on the same basis as nonminority citizens. To

limit the impact of these factors and to ensure the presence of young persons in decision-making positions, the government introduced an 11-seat national candidate list alternating between men and women younger than age 35 that would serve to promote both youth and women's representation. Two seats on the list were reserved for persons with disabilities. Similarly, a 30 percent quota in parliament was reserved for women.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by government officials, but authorities did not implement 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, although the government sometimes held officials accountable. 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, and land distribution, as well as in bank loans and tax payments. During the year, the government dismissed approximately 23 officials for engaging in corrupt practices. Authorities ordered those fired to reimburse the amounts they

allegedly embezzled within one month to avoid being put in pretrial detention, but these demands were not always fully enforced.

On January 25, former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and 10 alleged collaborators, including former Prime Ministers Mohamed Salem Ould Béchir and Yahya Ould Hademine, former Minister of Oil Taleb Ould Abdi Vall, former Director General of the state mining company Mohamed Abdellahi Ould Oudaa, and former President of the Nouadhibou Free Trade Zone Authority Mohamed Ould Daf, were tried on corruption charges. The trial revealed the extent of corrupt practices and breaches of economic transparency during the former president's rule, including allegations related to work carried out in the private residence of the former president at taxpayer expense, a controversial contract for installation of solar streetlamps awarded to a Chinese company, and illicit trafficking in gold and foreign currencies by members of the former president's family, among other examples of corruption. On December 4, Aziz was found guilty of illicit enrichment and money laundering and sentenced to five years in prison. Five of the president's codefendants were convicted and five were acquitted. On December 12, Aziz appealed the conviction.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restrictions to monitor and investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials were often cooperative and responsive to their views and requests for information.

Several domestic and international groups also reported evidence during the year 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.

On August 31, the Commissariat for Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Relations with Civil Society (CDHAHRSC) signed a partnership protocol with several civil society organizations active in the fields of human rights and the fight against slavery and human trafficking, including SOS-Esclaves, Sahel Foundation, and 11 other organizations. The agreement aimed at strengthening partnership with civil society organizations, especially in supporting a CDHAHRSC awareness campaign to fight against slavery and human trafficking.

Some human rights groups faced challenges or restrictions in conducting

their work, particularly those investigating cases of slavery and slavery-related practices. For example, authorities sometimes denied NGOs access to prosecutors' offices or to alleged victims while investigating possible slavery or slavery-related cases. On October 29, the NGO Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement organized a sit-in in front of the court of Aioun in Hodh El Gharbi to denounce court proceedings opened on land tenure related to hereditary slavery.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: On September 15, Senegalese authorities arrested and extradited to Mauritania Youba Ould El Ghoth, an antislavery human rights activist. The Mauritanian government alleged Youba discussed a subject that officials considered as harming national unity and social cohesion in a leaked WhatsApp recording. On November 9, the Nouakchott West Court convicted Youba and sentenced him to four years in prison with two years suspended. Youba appealed the decision but remained incarcerated at Nouakchott central prison at year's end.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The CDHAHRSC designed, promoted, and implemented national human rights policies. The CDHAHRSC managed government and internationally funded human rights and humanitarian assistance programs. The CDHAHRSC was considered effective, and although funded by the government, independent. Separate from the government-run CDHAHRSC, the CNDH, an independent ombudsperson organization, included government and civil society representatives and

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 hereditary slavery, and made recommendations to the government.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of women but not men. It did not criminalize spousal and domestic or intimate partner rape and other forms of domestic and sexual violence, including so-called corrective rape of LGBTQI+ persons. Single men accused of rape faced penalties of imprisonment, forced labor, and whipping; married men accused of rape were subject to the death penalty, although this penalty was last enforced in 1987. The government increasingly enforced the law and issued prison sentences for convicted rapists, but prosecutions remained unevenly applied. 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. Spousal abuse and domestic violence were illegal, but there were no specific penalties for

domestic violence. The government did not enforce the law effectively, and convictions were rare.

Survivors of rape were often discouraged from reporting the crime because they themselves could be jailed for having intercourse outside of marriage or deported for lack of identity documents. Reliable data on gender-based violence remained sparse, and the situation of children and women survivors 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 September 14, a young woman from the Trarza region was subjected to a gang sexual assault committed by several men who filmed the assault. The alleged perpetrators were arrested but were ultimately released and the case closed following mediation with the survivor.

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 prohibited FGM/C of any kind, and it was punishable by imprisonment and a monetary fine.

Authorities seldom applied the law due to lack of awareness of the law and traditional and religious beliefs surrounding the practice. According to the

results of the 2019-21 *Demographic and Health Survey* carried out by the National Statistics Office in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health, 64 percent of women ages 15 to 49 and 45 percent of girls ages 0 to 14 had undergone FGM/C. Approximately 58 percent of these took place before age five.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood, and Family continued to track the more than 2,000 traditional health providers who abandoned the practice of FGM/C to ensure they would not start the practice again.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: Traditional forms of mistreatment of women continued to decline but persisted. One of these was the forced feeding of adolescent girls prior to marriage, practiced by some Beydane families. Some girls were forced to eat up to 16,000 calories a day for two months or face physical punishments from family members. According to NGOs, doctors continued to perform so-called virginity tests, particularly in cases of rape and sexual violence. There were no laws against sexual harassment. Women's NGOs reported that sexual harassment was a common problem in the workplace.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. According to the National Observatory of the Rights of Women and Girls, women suffered from limited political participation and lack of access to decision-making circles. The observatory reported that women represented only 29 percent of administrative governmental

positions, 21.4 percent of ministerial positions, 6 percent of *walis* (governors), 0.31 percent of judges, and 0 percent of regional health directors.

Women faced other forms of legal discrimination. Women were not treated equally to men during court proceedings due to sharia being the basis for trial procedures. According to sharia as applied in the country, the testimony of two women was required to equal that of one man in all cases. The courts granted only one-half as large an indemnity to the family of a woman victim as that accorded to the family of a male victim. The personal status code provided 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, such as limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous and certain industries, including mining and construction.

Women had legal rights to property and child custody, and better educated and urbanized women were more likely to exercise these rights. Nevertheless, women in general had fewer legal rights than men.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Social and cultural barriers significantly limited access to contraception, including misinformation that contraception caused cancerous diseases, death, or infertility. Contraceptives were not widely available in health

centers, and some religious fatwas prohibited the use of contraception without the husband's permission. For unmarried women, stigma impeded access to contraception. According to the 2019-21 *Demographic and Health Survey*, the contraceptive prevalence rate for women older than 19 was 14 percent and 8.9 percent for girls ages 15 to 19, but many women lacked access to those services because of cost or lack of availability in rural areas. Social stigma 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 women and girls who were survivors of sexual violence. This unit also provided women emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy and postexposure prophylaxis 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 family from seeking assistance after incidents of sexual violence.

According to the government's 2019-21 *Demographic and Health Survey*, the maternal mortality rate for the seven years preceding the survey was 424 deaths per 100,000 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. In 2020,

the UN Population Division estimated the birth rate among adolescents (girls ages 15 to 19) to be 67 per 1,000. Child marriage contributed to the high adolescent birth rate.

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 either voluntarily or because of social stigmatization.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The law provided that all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity, were equal. Nevertheless, Haratines and sub-Saharanans often faced discrimination from the country's Beydane community. Police often tolerated discrimination towards Haratines and sub-Saharanans because the security services were largely controlled by Beydane.

Haratine and sub-Saharan ethnic groups faced governmental discrimination, while members of the Beydane ethnic group received governmental preference. Haratine and sub-Saharan citizens often faced difficulty obtaining documents necessary to have access to basic social services such as health care and education.

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 descent, largely identified culturally and linguistically as Arab –

and the sub-Saharan non-Arab minorities. Historically, the Beydane enslaved the Haratine population; Haratines continued to suffer from the legacy of centuries of slavery and present-day slavery practices. 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.

The government took steps to mitigate the economic factors that contributed to systemic racial and ethnic discrimination and to promote social cohesion. On September 4, the government launched a program to provide free health insurance to retired port laborers, most of whom were Haratines living in Nouakchott's poorest neighborhoods. On September 29, the General Delegate for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion launched a project to build 378 housing units in Nouadhibou for needy families. This launch also included the distribution of 6,000 health insurance cards to vulnerable families.

Children

Birth Registration: The government required proof of marriage and biological parents' citizenship for children to obtain a birth certificate. As a

result, children of Haratine and sub-Saharan individuals faced more difficulties in accessing documents. Children born out of wedlock were prevented from being registered at birth. Failure to register could result in denial of some public services, such as education.

Education: Children from both Haratine and sub-Saharan families were more likely to leave school early than other children because of a lack of civil registration papers or problems with the language of instruction; some sub-Saharan children did not speak Arabic, which was the primary language of instruction.

Child Abuse: There were laws against child abuse, although authorities rarely enforced them. Authorities also rarely investigated allegations of child abuse in homes or schools. On May 11, the Aleg Court of Appeal acquitted Amadou Hassinou for lack of evidence on allegations of the rape of a girl in 2018. The survivor's lawyer reportedly appealed the court's decision, and the case remained under judicial proceedings at year's end.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal age of marriage was 18 but authorities rarely enforced the law, and child marriage remained prevalent, primarily in rural areas. Child marriages were often unregistered with the government. Despite the law, local authorities reportedly often granted parents permission for their underage children to marry. Nonetheless, the government continued to work to combat child marriage and implement programs with international organizations and partners.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited sexual relations with a child younger than age 18, with penalties of six months to two years in prison and a fine. Possession of child pornography was illegal, with penalties of two months to one year in prison and a fine. The law prohibited the sale, grooming, or use of children for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking. Some human rights NGOs asserted the laws were not properly enforced.

Antisemitism

There was no known Jewish community, and no known incidents of antisemitism.

Trafficking in Persons

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

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: Under sharia, which was applied in the country, consensual same-sex sexual activity between men was punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals; similar activity between women was punishable by three

months to two years in prison and a fine. The government did not enforce the law.

Violence and Harassment: LGBTQI+ persons were sometimes harassed and arbitrarily arrested and detained by the National Police, the General Group for Road Safety, community members, and family. According to an LGBTQI+ NGO, conditions for LGBTQI+ persons were better than in previous years, noting less harassment by public authorities and an increased ability to meet discreetly without difficulties. LGBTQI+ persons still believed it safer to keep their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics private. At least two members of the LGBTQI+ community claimed to be frequently subjected to police harassment and brutality; both were arrested in 2020 for attending a birthday party widely covered on social media but inaccurately labeled a “gay wedding.” This social media exposure prevented them from securing employment.

Discrimination: No laws protected LGBTQI+ persons from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. LGBTQI+ persons faced discrimination in education, employment, health care, and housing because of their sexual orientation. LGBTQI+ identity was rarely publicly identified or discussed, which observers attributed to the severity of the stigma and legal penalties attached to it.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Legal gender recognition was not available.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were no reported cases of involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices targeting LGBTQI+ individuals during the year. There were no known reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible surgeries performed on children or on nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: Public demonstration of LGBTQI+ status or identity was taboo, and freedom of association was restricted. While organizations that promoted the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons were not permitted officially, informal organizations were tolerated when operating discreetly. In view of the social stigmatization associated with LGBTQI+ identity, most LGBTQI+ persons hid their identities to avoid problems with family, friends, or government authorities.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibited discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. The law provided 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 these laws effectively. Persons with disabilities generally did not have access to education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others.

According to the CDHAHRSC, the government took some measures, including the creation of seats reserved for persons with disabilities in parliament and a 5 percent quota reserved for persons with disabilities in the labor market. In addition, the government provided educational scholarships to more than 700 children 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.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Like other minority groups, the law protected 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.

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.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective

Bargaining

The law allowed 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 provided for the right to conduct legal strikes and to bargain collectively. Other provisions and laws severely restricted or excessively regulated these rights. The government did not effectively enforce laws that allowed for unions to conduct strikes.

Prior approval by authorities was required before a union could be recognized. The public prosecutor was required to authorize all trade unions before they could obtain legal status. The public prosecutor could provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of Interior if its officials believed the union did not comply with the law. The law also provided that authorities could initiate legal proceedings against union leaders who undermined public order or made false statements. This law authorized administrative authorities to dissolve, suspend, or deregister trade union organizations unilaterally.

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

Bargaining collectively at the national level required previous authorization or approval by the president, who decided how collective bargaining was organized. No such authorization was required for collective bargaining at the company level. The minister of labor, public service, and modernization of the administration could call for bargaining among employers, employees, labor unions, and the government. In addition, the ministry was entitled to take part in the preparation of collective agreements. The law provided that the meeting had to occur 15 days following a statement of nonagreement between parties. Some public service employees not governed by existing legislation had simple collective agreements but not the full range of collective bargaining rights.

The law provided for the right to strike, except for those working in services deemed essential. Aggrieved parties were required to follow complex procedures before conducting a strike. If negotiations between workers and employers failed to produce an agreement, the case was referred to the Court of Arbitration. If the court failed to broker a mutually satisfactory agreement, workers were required to wait up to four additional months before they could legally strike, and the union was required to submit official notification to the employer that conciliation efforts had broken down. The government could also dissolve a union for what it considered an illegal or politically motivated strike. The law prohibited workers from holding sit-ins or blocking nonstriking workers from entering work premises. The law required advance notice of one month for civil service unions and at

least 10 working days in the private sector before a strike. The law provided the government with authority to determine the legality of a strike but no right of appeal for unions. The law prohibited certain types of strikes such as the peaceful occupation of workplaces or their immediate surroundings.

The government did not enforce the law effectively and did not provide adequate resources for inspections. Penalties for violations of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike were less than those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations, and 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. On September 17, the Ministry of Labor and Public Service launched a national campaign for the implementation of labor legislation, which entailed periodic inspection visits to all companies and institutions subject to labor law to determine the degree of labor law enforcement. Labor legislation was modified regarding the increase of bonuses and allowances for civil servants and contractual agents, such as special liability risk premiums. The government approved an increase of the minimum wage in December 2022 and included an obligation for companies to register their employees in the national social security fund to benefit from a retirement plan. While antiunion discrimination was illegal, national human rights groups such as Women Heads of Households and unions reported authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms. Collective

bargaining at the company level remained rare.

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 restricted 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

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

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

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/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provided for a national minimum wage that was higher than the most recent estimate for the poverty income level. The law provided that the standard legal nonagricultural workweek could not exceed either 40 hours or six days per week. Domestic workers and certain

other categories could work 56 hours per week. There were no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime. Alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in domestic and household work, agriculture, fishing, and mining sectors. *Tacheronnat*, a contractual system of nonbinding daily labor, remained widespread, although it was prohibited in a 2013 law. Tacheronnat intermediaries were the main recruiters in several sectors, including extractive industries, multinational companies, and the water, electricity, and transport sectors.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government set occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, and in principle workers had the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment; however, this was rarely applied. These standards applied only to the formal sector, and labor inspectors rarely identified unsafe conditions or responded to workers' complaints. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that the labor inspectorate was subject to undue influence by employers and the government, thereby reducing the effectiveness of inspection activity.

Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in mining, fishing, industrial, and construction sectors.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcing labor laws but often failed to do so effectively. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The number of

labor inspectors was sufficient for the labor force, and inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections. Despite the ban of the tacheronnat system, trade union officials believed the subcontracting system continued to be practiced and negatively impacted the employment environment. Under this subcontracting practice, companies used private intermediaries to employ a local workforce under questionable working conditions including low wages and no benefits. According to trade union representatives, workers were often powerless, without the possibility to appeal a dispute. According to trade union workers, more than 2,000 cases of professional disputes were waiting to be processed before the labor courts. The ports, construction, and mining sectors were the most affected by these violations.

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 were not commensurate with those for comparable violations.

According to the ILO, almost two-thirds of the population were not employed, partly due to the low level of participation of women in the workforce; more than 56 percent of the working population labored in the informal sector. The government did not enforce labor laws in the informal sector.