



Anti-Slavery International
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Descent based slavery

What is descent based slavery?

Descent based slavery occurs in some countries where slavery is a condition ascribed at birth, passing through generations. In these societies there exists a strict hierarchy based along ethnic and sometimes racial lines. Nobles and freemen are at the top of the hierarchy, who are followed by caste groups which is usually related to occupations (for example, blacksmiths or potters). Slaves and their descendants are at the very bottom of the caste system and suffer discrimination due to being a member of the slave caste. They are not allowed to own land or inherit property, they are denied education, they are not able to marry outside of the slave caste and are excluded from the decision-making process.

Where does descent based slavery take place?

Anti-Slavery International works with partners in the following countries where descent-based slavery takes place:

Mauritania: Mauritania is an Islamic Republic in west Africa with a population of 3.4 million. The *Hratine* or Black *Maures* are descended from sedentary black ethnic groups along the Senegal river who historically have been raided, enslaved and assimilated by the White *Maures* (Berber Arabs). The White *Maures* form the ethnic elite in Mauritania and control the economy, government, military and the police. Slavery is practiced on a lesser scale by other ethnic groups in the country.

Mali : Mali, officially the **Republic of Mali** the seventh largest country in Africa, is a [landlocked](#) nation in [Western Africa](#). Slavery in Mali takes place in a similar manner to slavery in Mauritania, but the *Bellah* group are the equivalent of the *Hratine*.

Niger: Niger is a West African Country with a population of 13.3m. The capital is Niamey. Today, slavery remains deeply embedded in Niger society. It exists across the country, both in rural and urban areas, and is practised predominantly by the *Tuareg*, *Maure* (Berber Arab, pronounced Moor), and *Peule* (also known as *Pulaar* or *Fulani*) ethnic groups.

How do people become slaves?

Slavery is a status ascribed at birth in the countries where it occurs.

In Niger for example the *Tuareg* follow a complicated caste system which incorporates slaves at the bottom. *Tuareg* culture does not allow people to marry outside of their caste. It is significant that in Niger slaves identify themselves as *Tuareg* even if their ancestry technically belongs to African people enslaved by *Tuareg* raiders.

At the top of *Tuareg* culture are nobles and warriors; next come Islamic clerics or *marabouts*, below them are free men, followed by casted groups such as blacksmiths and other occupational castes. Below all of these are freed-slaves and the bottom rung is reserved for slaves. All these free and casted groups can have slaves, even slaves themselves if they have the financial means.

You can be freed in *Tuareg* culture by your master if they wish to appease Allah to make amends for an indiscretion or even out of the goodness of their heart. Historically, slaves could be freed if they acted with distinction and valour in battle. Despite this, freed slaves remain near the bottom of the *Tuareg* caste system, only above slaves.

How many people are in descent based slavery?

In Mauritania there has not been a definitive survey conducted to determine the number of people affected by descent based slavery, however Anti-Slavery International's partner organisation, SOS Esclaves and some political parties believe that as much as 18 percent of the population of 3.4 million may be victims of slavery.

In Mali, again there are no definitive figures, but it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of enslaved people in the north of the country. It is also estimated that there are more than 40,000 people in slavery across Niger.

What kind of life do victims of descent based slavery lead?

Victims of slavery by descent have no control over their lives, they are literally owned by others and can be inherited by the masters children.

Those who are still in slavery today are treated as property by their masters.

The men and children care for the animals, which are usually camels, cows, and goats. No payment is received by any of these slaves for the work they do although they may be given food and lodgings.

When a slave marries, the dowry may be seized by the master and, if a slave dies, their property can be claimed by the master.

In some cases, slaves work the master's land and provide a percentage of the crops to him. These slaves may be considered to be more like serfs as they do not live under the master's control on a day-to-day basis. However, the master still exerts rights of ownership over them and can demand that work is done for him without payment.

Female slaves face double discrimination both as members of the 'slave caste' and because they are women.

Female slaves are frequently beaten and raped by their masters who consider them to be their property. Their children are also considered the master's property and, along with other slaves, can be rented out or loaned or given as gifts in marriage.

Female slaves who live in their masters' homes are rarely allowed out and generally work from before sunrise to after sunset, caring for the master's children, fetching water, gathering firewood, pounding millet, moving tents made of heavy animal skin and performing other domestic tasks.

Please click to read the story of Hadjiatiou Mani, a 24 year old woman who won a landmark case against the government of Niger for failing to protect her from slavery.

What laws are in place to protect those affected by descent based slavery?

The absolute prohibition on slavery is also one of the most *fundamental principles of international law*, binding on all states whether or not they have ratified a particular treaty. This means that there can be no exceptions to the prohibition and no excuses for non-compliance. Other laws include:

The Slavery Convention 1926:

- obliges states to 'prevent and suppress the slave trade,' to bring about as soon as possible the eradication of slavery and to adopt measures to give effect to the convention and ensure that severe penalties are imposed for slavery.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981:

- prohibits slavery, exploitation, torture and cruel inhuman and degrading treatment, guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination e.g. on grounds of sex and social origin and the right to marry a person of choice

UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979

- prohibits discrimination, including violence, against women. It explicitly obliges states to change customary practices, and modes of social behaviour, that discriminate against women, provides for the right to marry a person of choice and notes that child marriage is without legal effect

The Amended ECOWAS Treaty, 1991

- a 'fundamental principle' is the 'recognition, promotion and protection of human rights...' (Article 4(g))

How can descent based slavery take place in a modern world?

Descent based slavery has been practiced for hundreds of years in different parts of the world. It continues to be perpetuated today, despite the international conventions which prohibit it, as a result of ineffective implementation of legislation, and discrimination. A number of different United Nations Conventions, and regional laws prohibit slavery, yet as the figures above show it is still a common occurrence. Those mostly affected by slavery are victims of discrimination based on caste or/and ethnicity and are marginalised and socially excluded as a result as well as being denied any political agency. Therefore the lack of political will to implement existing laws underpins its perpetuation. The Hadjiatou Mani case has now set a precedent that all West African states must effectively implement domestic, regional and international laws to protect victims of slavery.

What can students do to help fight against contemporary slavery?

Students and young people have a vital role to play in the fight to eradicate slavery in all its forms from the world today. The first step is awareness of the issue, once you are aware, you can make a lot of other people aware and they in turn can make more people aware. When a lot of people are armed with facts then they can start to lobby decision makers, both governments at home and internationally as well as international organisations. Sufficient lobbying can make a massive difference to decision makers, who will either be counting on your votes now or in a few years time. For example six years ago in the UK, not many people knew about trafficking, but with education, the general public and organisations like Anti-Slavery International lobbied the government started to take steps to address the problem and produce a protection and rehabilitation focused action plan. Whilst there is still a way to go, the UK government has now signed the Council of Europe Convention on Trafficking, which offers victims of trafficking minimum protections.

Activities that students can carry out to help raise awareness and fight for the eradication of slavery include:

- Visiting the Anti-Slavery International website and learning about the different forms of slavery
- Joining the Campaigns Network and taking regular actions on campaigns
- Writing a letter to your local MP and asking for action on a particular campaign
- Becoming a member of Anti-Slavery International
- Holding an awareness raising day at school/college/university/place of worship/youth club/community centre
- Organising a writing group and asking each one in the group to write a letter to your favourite shops asking what measures they are taking to identify, prevent and end the use of slavery in their supply chain
- Organising a fund-raising activity to raise funds to help support Anti-Slavery International's partners in their release and rehabilitation of enslaved people
- Supporting the Niger Schools Development project which provides education for children descended from slavery