

# Mauritania

## Country Overview

### Politics

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a presidential republic in West Africa. In June 2014, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was re-elected for his second and final term.<sup>1</sup> In June 2019 elections, Mohammed Ould Ghazouani, the candidate backed by Mauritania's ruling party, was declared to have won the presidency.<sup>2</sup>

### Economy

Mauritania is classified by the World Bank as a lower middle income economy.<sup>3</sup> The country's economy is heavily reliant on the extractives sector which was largely responsible for robust GDP growth averaging around 5.5 percent per year between 2003 and 2015.<sup>4</sup> Poor trade terms as well as slower mining and oil production had contributed to a 1.2 percent decrease in GDP growth in 2015, but the economy has since gradually recovered due to increased activity in the transport, telecommunications, electricity and primary sectors<sup>5</sup> with an average annual GDP growth of 3.85 percent between 2017 and 2019.<sup>6</sup> However, the global economic slowdown brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic contracted Mauritania's real GDP growth by -2.2 percent in 2020.<sup>7</sup> While Mauritania draws foreign direct investment from extractive commodities, such as iron ore, gold, copper, gypsum, phosphate rock, uranium, crude oil, and natural gas, half the country's population is engaged in agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods.<sup>8</sup> Fishing is also a key economic resource for Mauritania, representing 15 percent of the country's budget revenues.<sup>9</sup>

Threats to Mauritania's economy include recurring droughts, dependence on foreign investment, reliance on foreign aid, instability in its neighboring country Mali, as well as insufficient domestic infrastructure, institutional capacity, and human capital.<sup>10</sup>

Although the U.S. Department of State, Mauritania describes Mauritania as welcoming to foreign direct investment, the country's underdeveloped infrastructure, procedurally complex credit system, weak judicial system, pervasive levels of corruption in government, and lack of skilled labor pose challenges for international business. The U.S. Department of State describes economic relations with Mauritania as limited but increasing.<sup>11</sup>

### Social/Human Development

The Mauritanian population is growing, and almost 60 percent of the population is under 25 years of age. However, according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), this population is poorly equipped to enter the workforce. The educational quality in the country is reportedly low, with a literacy rate of 53.5 percent. Women and black Moors face discrimination and limited access to education, making them especially vulnerable to conditions of slavery and forced labor. Despite anti-slavery laws, Mauritania has been reported to have a particularly high rate of enslavement with upper estimates of 20 percent of the



population enslaved, according to the UNI and international media.<sup>12</sup> The 2018 Global Slavery Index reported the rate of enslavement at 2.1%, with 90,000 people living in modern slavery.<sup>13</sup>

Poverty levels have been declining across the population, but remain relatively high. In 2000 51 percent of the population lived in poverty, compared with 31 percent in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The percentage of the population living at USD 1.90 a day (2011 international prices) has declined dramatically from 41.1 percent in 1993, 20.4 percent in 2000, 10.9 percent in 2008, and 6 percent in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Mauritania's Human Development Index score for 2019 was 0.5246. This score puts Mauritania in the "low human development" category and ranks the country 157 out of 189 countries.<sup>16</sup>

## U.S. Department of State TIP Report Summary

U.S. Department of State TIP Ranking: Tier 2 Watch List

The *Trafficking in Persons* Report notes hereditary slavery in livestock herding and domestic servitude. The U.S. Department of State additionally identifies forced begging as prevalent in Quoranic schools. Women and girls are vulnerable to sex trafficking and sex servitude both within and outside the borders of the country.

Read the full TIP Report at:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>

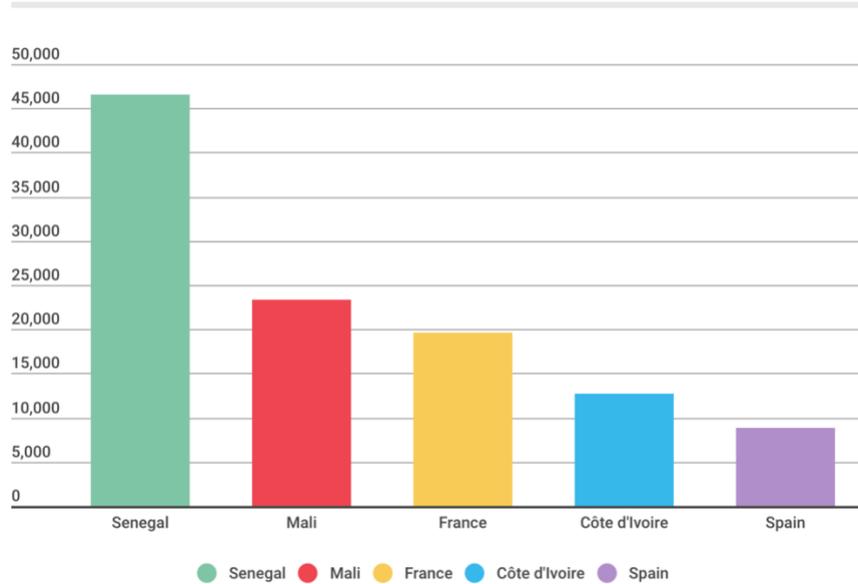
## Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

Mauritania has a negative net migration.<sup>17</sup> In 2015, almost three percent of Mauritians lived outside their country.<sup>18</sup> International migrants made up 3.8 percent of the Mauritanian population in 2019.<sup>19</sup> The largest source countries for migrants were Mali and Senegal.<sup>20</sup> There were an estimated 95,601 persons of concern in Mauritania at the end of 2020, including 67,637 refugees and 1,964 asylum-seekers.<sup>21</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) supports around 64,000 Malian refugees in the south-eastern Mbera camp fleeing the Northern Mali Conflict.<sup>22</sup>

The most common destination country for migrants from Mauritania is Senegal, followed by Mali, France, Côte d'Ivoire, and Spain.<sup>23</sup>

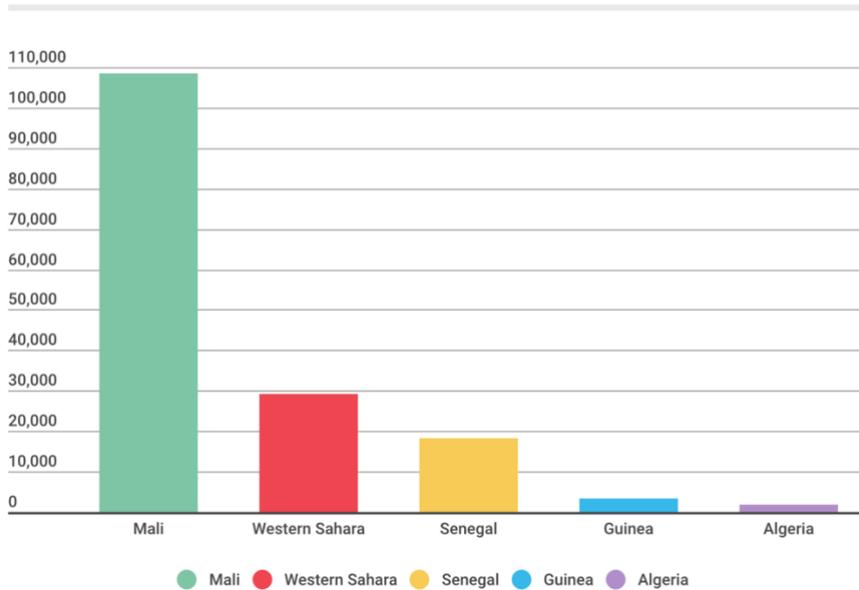


**Migrants from Mauritania**



The top five countries sending migrants to Mauritania include Mali, Western Sahara, Senegal, Guinea and Algeria.<sup>24</sup>

**Migrants to Mauritania**



**Exports and Trade**

Mauritania’s top exports in 2020 include iron ores and concentrates, mollusks, frozen fish, gold, and copper ores and concentrates.<sup>25</sup>



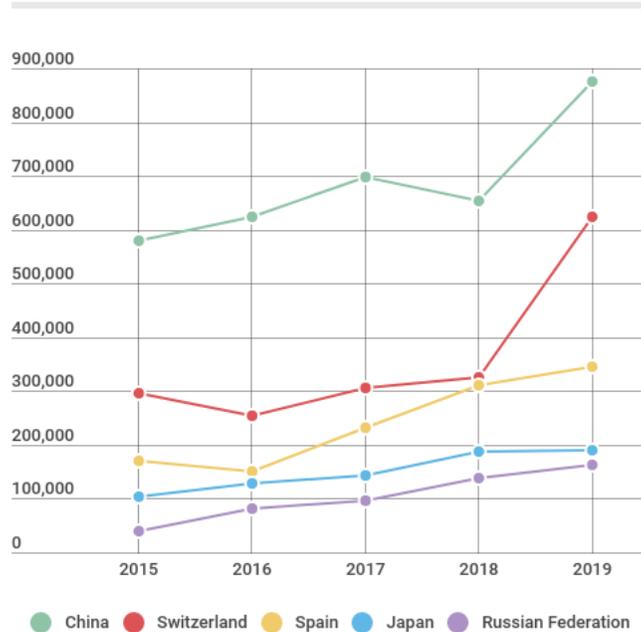
### Top Commodity Exports (USD/Thousands)



The top importers of all goods from Mauritania include China, Switzerland, Spain, Japan, and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>26</sup>



**Mauritania Export Partners (USD/Thousands)**



Mauritania was the 187th largest supplier of goods to the United States in 2019.<sup>27</sup>

## Trafficking in Persons Risk Factor Analysis

### Legal/Policy Risk Factors

### Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers' Rights

#### Freedom of Association

Although the law provides for the rights of workers to form and organize unions (with exceptions for police, armed forces and foreign and migrant workers), a union must receive authorization from the public prosecutor in order to be legally recognized. The law also allows administrative authorities to dissolve, suspend, or deregister unions.<sup>28</sup> Workers are allowed to bargain collectively as well, but previous authorization from the President is required for bargaining at the national level and the Ministry for the Civil Service and Labor controls whether or not an organization can participate in negotiations.<sup>29</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, the government does not effectively enforce the law and "freedom of association and the right to collective bargain were not fully respected."<sup>30</sup>

#### Working conditions

The law sets the minimum wage at MRO 30,000 (USD 86) per month.<sup>31</sup> The legal workweek for nonagricultural works is 40 hours or six days, with overtime pay beyond that point. The legal workweek



for domestic workers is 56 hours. There are no laws concerning compulsory overtime. At least one 24-hour rest period per week is required. Workers in the formal sector have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions. However, this law does not apply to workers in the informal sector and is rarely enforced. The Labor Office is reportedly ineffective at enforcing labor laws.<sup>32</sup>

## Discrimination

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 U.S. Department of State reports that these laws are not always enforced and that discrimination occurs in practice, especially with respect to race and language.<sup>33</sup>

## Forced Labor

The law prohibits forced labor, but the U.S. Department of State reports that the government has not met the minimum standards for its elimination despite making significant efforts to do so.<sup>34</sup> The practice of heredity slavery has a long legacy in Mauritania, which only abolished the practice in 1981 and criminalized it in 2007. It is estimated that 2.4 percent of the country’s population is either enslaved or in forced and bonded labor conditions.<sup>35</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, some former slaves are forced, due to a lack of opportunity and cultural traditions, to revert to a “de facto slave status” with many continuing to work for their former masters in exploitative conditions.<sup>36</sup> The ethnic Haratine, also known as Black Moors, and Afro-Mauritanian communities are traditionally subjected to heredity slavery.<sup>37</sup>

## Child Labor

The law sets the legal minimum working age at 16. However, children as young as 12 can work in family enterprises with some restrictions and with the authorization of the Ministry of Labor, Public Service, and Modernization of the Administration. The employment of children is not prohibited in all hazardous occupations and activities. However children are explicitly prohibited from being employed for illicit activities, such as drug production or trafficking. Children who do unpaid, temporary, or noncontractual work are not protected by child labor laws to the same extent as children who engage in formal, contractual work. Informal work for children is common, especially in poorer urban areas. Children reportedly work as unpaid domestic servants, engage in agricultural labor, deliver materials, collect garbage, steal and beg under the guidance of gang leader, and work as apprentices in small-scale industries. Education is compulsory for six years of school attendance. Girls and children from Haratine and sub-Saharan backgrounds often do not attend school for the mandatory amount of time.<sup>38</sup> Children from the Halpulaar community are particularly susceptible to forced begging in Quranic schools.<sup>39</sup>

## Civil Society Organizations

The U.S. Department of State reports that human rights groups “generally operated without government restriction” and that “government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.”<sup>40</sup> However, according to Freedom House, civil society groups and NGOs often experience intimidation, violence, and repression.<sup>41</sup> Both the U.S. Department of State and Freedom House reported restrictions on human rights groups investigating instances of slavery.<sup>42</sup>



## Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants

ILO 29 Forced Labor	In force
ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize	In force
ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining	In force
ILO 100 Equal Remuneration	In force
ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor	In force
ILO 111 Discrimination	In force
ILO 138 Minimum Age	In force
ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies	Not ratified
ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor	In force
ILO 97 Migration for Employment	Not ratified <sup>43</sup>

## Political Factors

### Political Instability or Conflict

Mauritania scored a 89.1 in the 2021 Fragile States Index, placing it in the “Alert” Category, a slight worsening from the country’s score of 88.7 in 2020.<sup>44</sup>

Mauritania’s percentile rank for political stability and absence of violence/terrorism was 26.19 on the World Bank’s 2019 *Worldwide Governance Indicators Report*.<sup>45</sup>

### Level of Crime and Violence

The U.S. Department of State reports that the crime level in Mauritania’s capital, Nouakchott, is critical.<sup>46</sup> The World Economic Forum *Global Competitiveness Report* ranked Mauritania at 50/140 for organized crime.<sup>47</sup>

### State Persecution

Amnesty International reports that political activists, anti-slavery organizations, journalists and political opponents of the government face state persecution in Mauritania.<sup>48</sup> According to the U.S. Department



of State, persons without identity cards have difficulty traveling in some regions of the country; without a birth certificate, children are blocked from enrolling in school and from receiving other benefits of citizenship. Mauritania's sub-Saharan ethnic minorities and the Haratines often lack documentation.<sup>49</sup>

Only Muslims are allowed to be citizens in Mauritania.<sup>50</sup> However, Freedom House reports that, despite the fact that proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal and non-Muslims are barred from citizenship, non-Muslim communities have not been targeted by state persecution.<sup>51</sup>

## Level of Corruption

The 2020 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index scores Mauritania at 29 out of 100, where a 0 signals "Highly Corrupt" and a 100 signals "Very Clean." Mauritania is ranked 134 out of 180 on that index.<sup>52</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, officials engage in corruption with impunity in the country, and corruption is believed to infiltrate all levels of government. While more cases of corruption were being prosecuted as of 2018, many of those found guilty are only required to return money taken and are fired from their post.<sup>53</sup> Most notably former president Ould Abdel Aziz and several members of his government were charged with corruption in 2021 following an investigation into his decade long rule.<sup>54</sup>

Freedom House has stated that corruption is a common problem relating mainly to bank loans, obtaining licenses and permits, land distribution, government contracts, and tax payments.<sup>55</sup> The U.S. Department of State adds that the judiciary is susceptible to undue influence and corruption from tribal pressures and bribery.<sup>56</sup>

## Socio-Economic Factors

### Level of National Economic Development

Mauritania is scored in the low human development category, according to the UN Human Development Index, with a rank of 157 out of 189 countries and a score of 0.546. Mauritania's human development score is higher than its southern neighbors, Senegal and Mali, but lower than Algeria and Morocco to the north.<sup>57</sup>

### Level and Extent of Poverty

Mauritania has a relatively high level of poverty, with 50.6 percent of the population determined to be living in multi-dimensional poverty according to the UN. When adjusted for inequality, the Human Development Index score falls to 0.371.<sup>58</sup> As of 2019, Mauritania's gross national income (GNI) per capita (constant 2017 PPP \$) was USD 5,135, a substantial increase from USD 4,702 in 2010, and USD 4,474 in 1990.<sup>59</sup> The income share held by the lowest 40 percent has also increased, but it remains quite low at 19.9 percent as of 2020.<sup>60</sup>

### Degree of Gender Inequality



The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index scores Mauritania low for gender equality at 0.634, ranking it 157 out of 189 countries in 2019.<sup>61</sup> In 2021, the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* ranked Mauritania 146 out of 156 with a Gender Gap Index of 0.614, where 1 is parity and 0 is disparity.<sup>62</sup>

Gender equality is protected by the Mauritanian constitution and the law prohibits discrimination based on gender identity. Women are allowed to register businesses, access lines of credit and open bank accounts. Women have equal rights to own and inherit land, however they are subject to legal and cultural limitations.<sup>63</sup> Under civil law, women are not allowed to transfer or buy land without the consent of a third party, and if a woman gives more than a third of her land away, her husband has the authority to intervene. It is reported that women face additional difficulties retaining property in the event of divorce or widowhood. Women also have the right to child custody, but they can lose this right if they remarry.<sup>64</sup>

Mauritania law prescribes a framework to consistently apply secular and sharia-based family law. However, according to the U.S. Department of State, judicial officials do not always apply this framework, resulting in legal discrimination.<sup>65</sup> Under Sharia law women are entitled to only half of what men can inherit. Furthermore the testimony of two women is equal to one man in court, and families of male victims receive twice the compensation that families of female victims receive. While rape is outlined as a criminal offence in the Penal Code, under Sharia law rape victims may be accused of sexual intercourse outside of marriage and face imprisonment.<sup>66</sup>

The law mandates equal pay for equal work. According to the U.S. Department of State, this law has been observed in civil service and the state mining company, the country's two largest employers. However, this law is not commonly observed in the private sector. Moreover women face legal limitations in employment in industries deemed as dangerous, such as mining or construction.<sup>67</sup> Only 28.9 percent of women are in the labor force compared to 63.1 percent of men.<sup>68</sup> Women have significantly lower access to education. Only 12.7 percent of women over the age of 25 received at least some secondary education compared to 25 percent of men.<sup>69</sup>

Rape is illegal under Mauritanian law; however, no definition is offered. Even though reported to be pervasive, there are no laws criminalizing domestic violence and sexual harassment.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore While rape is outlined as a criminal offence in the Penal Code, under Sharia law rape victims may be accused of sexual intercourse outside of marriage and face imprisonment.<sup>71</sup>

## Landlessness and Dispossession

Land dispossession has a long and complex history in Mauritania, especially in the southern part of the country along the Senegal River. Between 1989 and 1991 the government removed tens of thousands of non-Arab sub-Saharan citizens from the Senegal River Valley and expelled them from the country. The dispossessed land was then sold or given to members of the Beydane (Arab) ethnic group. According to the U.S. Department of State, there are still frequent land disputes among Haratines, sub-Saharans, and Beydane. Local authorities have reportedly allowed Beydane to appropriate land occupied by Haratines and sub-Saharans and to obstruct access to water and pastures.<sup>72</sup> In 2014, the Mauritanian government signed an agreement with the Saudi Arabian Al Rajhi Bank that gave the Bank permission to cultivate 31,000 hectares in two provinces in the Senegal River Valley without the consent of rural communities.<sup>73</sup>



Slavery and slavery-related practices still persist in Mauritania, according to the U.S. Department of State. Former slaves and descendants continue to work for their former masters in many instances because of a lack of marketable skills, access to land, and poverty. The law calls for the redistribution of land to persons without land, including former slaves, but authorities rarely enforce it, leaving slavery descendants dependant on their former masters for access to farming land.<sup>74</sup>

## Environmental Factors

Mauritania experiences periodic droughts, which with overgrazing and deforestation, is leading to the desertification of the country. Most of the country is located within the Sahara desert and experiences problems with high temperatures, seasonal dust storms, and a lack of water resources.<sup>75</sup> The CIA reports that only 0.4 percent of the land was arable as of 2018.<sup>76</sup> During the rainy season the country is additionally affected by floods which create favourable conditions for the reproduction of locust. The difficult environmental conditions have contributed to widespread food insecurity, which stood at 15 percent in 2020.<sup>77</sup>

## Documented Trafficking Risk in Key Commodity Supply Chains

### Livestock

#### Livestock Overview

With little arable land, Mauritania has had a long tradition of herding and shepherding animals.<sup>78</sup> According to the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2018, there were an estimated 11 million sheep, 7.5 million goats, and 1.9 million cattle in Mauritania.<sup>79</sup> Many animals spend the wet season in the rangeland in Mauritania, before being taken south to market in Senegal.<sup>80</sup> Milk and dairy products are considered staples of the traditional Mauritanian diet, with the country's per capita consumption of milk being nearly six times higher than the average sub-saharan country.<sup>81</sup>

#### Documented TIP Risk in Livestock

In Mauritania, traditional slave castes in the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities are subject to inherited slavery. The U.S. Department of State reports that a significant part of the population continues to work as unpaid cattle herders. Many former slaves return to a de facto slave status upon emancipation as they continue to work on their former master's land in exchange for food and lodging.<sup>82</sup> In recent years, late rainy seasons and droughts have increasingly threatened the food security for herders in the region. These changes in weather have reduced the amount of vegetation available for grazing, which has led to increased competition between herders for resources and deaths in herds. Droughts, threatened food security and related loss in livelihood have the potential to contribute to TIP vulnerability.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook: Mauritania*. 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/>

<sup>75</sup> World Bank. *Mauritania: Overview*. 2021. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/overview>

<sup>76</sup> World Bank. *Mauritania*. 2021. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/mauritania>



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