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realizing you're enslaved.

Slavery's last stronghold



Moulkheir Mint Yarba returned from a day of tending her master's goats out on the Sahara Desert to find something unimaginable: Her baby girl, barely old enough to crawl, had been left outdoors to die.

The usually stoic mother — whose jet-black eyes and cardboard hands carry decades of sadness — wept when she saw her child's lifeless face, eyes open and covered in ants, resting in the orange sands of the Mauritanian desert. The master who raped Moulkheir to produce the child wanted to punish his slave. He told her she would work faster without the child on her back.

Trying to pull herself together, Moulkheir asked if she could take a break to give her daughter a proper burial. Her master's reply: Get back to work.

"Her soul is a dog's soul," she recalls him saying.

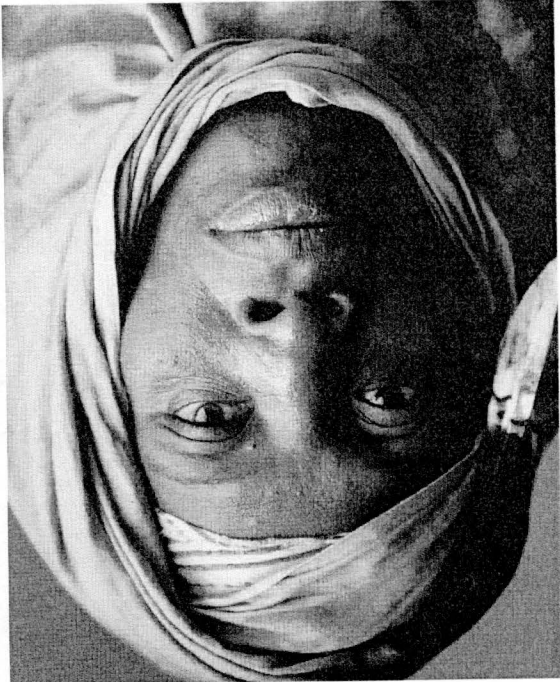
Later that day, at the cemetery, "We dug a shallow grave and buried her in her clothes, without washing her or giving her burial rites."

"I only had my tears to console me," she would later tell anti-slavery activists, according to a written testimony. "I cried a lot for my daughter and for the situation I was in. Instead of understanding, they ordered me to shut up. Otherwise, they would make things worse for me — so bad that I wouldn't be able to endure it."

Moulkheir told her story to CNN in December, when a reporter and videographer visited Mauritania — a vast, bone-dry nation on the western fringe of the Sahara — to document slavery in the place where the practice is arguably more common, more readily accepted and more intractable than anywhere else on Earth.

An estimated 10% to 20% of Mauritania's 3.4 million people are enslaved — in "real slavery," according to the United Nations' special rapporteur on contemporary forms of

Nouakchott, Mauritania (CNN)



Moulkheir Mint Yarba escaped slavery in 2010. She has asked the Mauritanian courts to prosecute her slave masters. "I demand justice," she says, "justice for my daughter that they killed and justice for all the time they spent beating and abusing me."

MAURITANIA BY THE NUMBERS

SLAVERY

Population: 3.4 million

Percentage living in slavery: 10% to 20%

Enslaved population: 340,000 to 680,000

Year slavery was abolished: 1981

Year slavery became a crime: 2007

Convictions against slave owners: One

GEOGRAPHY

Area: 400,000 square miles, slightly larger than Egypt

Capital: Nouakchott

Bordered by: Mali, Senegal, Algeria, Western Sahara

Landscape: Sahara Desert, Sahel

slavery, Gulnara Shahninian. If that's not unbelievable enough, consider that Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery. That happened in 1981, nearly 120 years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States. It wasn't until five years ago, in 2007, that Mauritania passed a law that criminalized the act of owning another person. So far, only one case has been successfully prosecuted.

The country is slavery's last stronghold.

Even knowing those facts before we departed, what we found on the ground in West Africa astonished us. Mauritania feels stuck in time in ways both quaint and sinister. It's a place where camels and goats roam the streets alongside dented French sedans; where silky sand dunes give the land the look of a meringue pie topping; where desert winds play with the cloaks of nomadic herdsman, making their silhouettes look like dancing flames on the horizon; and where, incredibly, the nuances of a person's skin color and family history determine whether he or she will be free or enslaved.

That reality permeates every aspect of Mauritanian life — from the dark-skinned boys who serve mint-flavored tea at restaurants to the clothes people wear. A man wearing a powder-blue garment that billows at the arms and has fancy gold embroidery on the chest is almost certainly free and comes from the traditional slave-owning class of White Moors, who are lighter-skinned Arabs. A woman in a loud tie-dye print that covers her hair, but not her arms, is likely a slave. Her arms are exposed, against custom, so she can work.

It's a maddening, complicated place — one made all the more difficult for outsiders to understand because no one is allowed to talk about slavery. When we confronted the country's minister of rural development about slavery's existence, Brahim Ould M'Bareck Ould Med El Moctar told us his country is among the freest in the world. "All people are free in Mauritania and this phenomenon (of slavery) no longer exists," he said.

The issue is so sensitive here that we had to conduct most of our interviews in secret, often in the middle of the night and in covert locations. The only other option was to do them in the presence of a government minder, who was assigned to our group by the Ministry of Communications to ensure we didn't mention the topic. Our official reason for entering the country was to report on the science of locust swarms; our contacts for that story were unaware of our plan to research slavery.

If we were caught talking with an escaped slave like Moulkheir, we could have been arrested or thrown out of the country without our notebooks and footage. That point was made clear to us in a meeting with the national director of audiovisual communications, Mohamed Yahya Ould Haye, who told us journalists who attempted to report on such topics were jailed or ejected from the country.

PEOPLE

Farmable land: 0.2%

Official religion: Islam

Literacy rate: 51%

Unemployment: 30%

Population density: 8 people per square mile

ECONOMY

Percentage living on less than \$2 per day: 44%

GDP (purchasing power parity): \$7.2 billion, less than Haiti

GDP per capita: \$2,200 (compared to \$48,000 in the U.S.)

Currency: Ouguiya

POLITICS

Government: Republic (currently under military rule)

Legal system: Mix of Islamic and French civil law

President: Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

Recent history: Gained independence from France in 1960. Aziz came to power in a military coup in 2008, overthrowing first democratically elected leader. Aziz was elected in 2009 as a way to validate his rule.

Sources: United Nations, Encyclopedia Britannica, CIA World Factbook, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, "Disposable People," BBC Country Profiles

More important, getting caught talking about slavery could have put our sources at risk. Anti-slavery activists say they have been arrested and tortured for their work.

When we met Moulkheir in a gray, open-air office in Nouakchott, Mauritania's seaside capital city where concrete buildings are scattered on the Sahara like Legos in a sandbox, our hired security guard stood watch at the door to make sure no government representatives were following us, as they had during other parts of our visit.

Moulkheir, who is in her 40s, wore a bright blue headscarf and matching dress. She was brave enough to tell her tale with poise and unflinching resolve. She did so in hopes her former masters would be brought to justice. She was aware that telling her story could put her in danger but asked to be named and to have her photograph shown. "I am not afraid of anyone," she said.

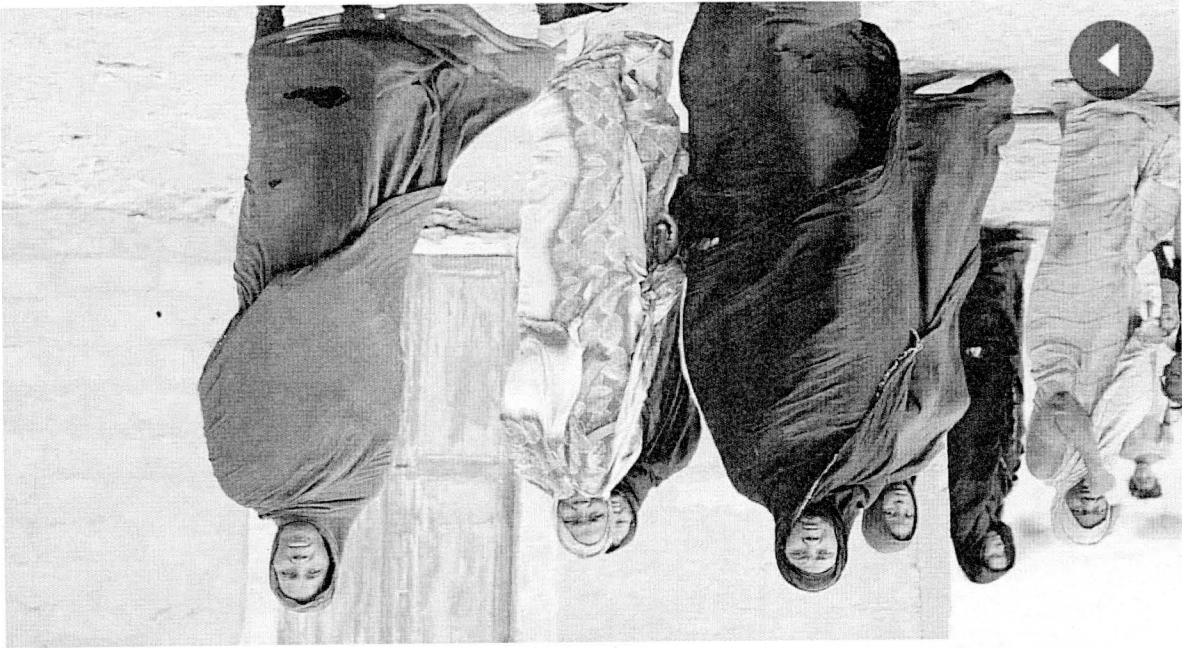
As she recounted her torture, imprisonment and escape, her hands gestured wildly but her eyes stayed focused, with dart-like precision, on mine.

Listening to her story, two facts became painfully clear:

In Mauritania, the shackles of slavery are mental as well as physical.

And breaking them — an unthinkable long process — requires unlikely allies.

DOCUMENTARY: THE LONG PATH TO FREEDOM



Moulkheir was born a slave in the northern deserts of Mauritania, where the sand dunes are pocked with thorny acacia trees. As a child, she talked more frequently with camels than people, spending days at a time in the Sahara, tending to her master's herd. She rose before dawn and toiled into the night, pounding