



Descent-based slavery in Mali

Current characteristics and
recent responses

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AMDH	Association Malienne des Droits de l'Homme (Malian Association for Human Rights)
CFA	African Financial Community
CNDH	Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme (National Human Rights Commission)
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
GBP	Great British Pound
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Temedt	Association pour la consolidation de la paix, le développement, la promotion et protection des droits humains (Association for the consolidation of peace, development, and the promotion and protection of human rights)
XOF	West African Franc

Section 1: Introduction

Descent-based slavery refers to the situation of people born into slavery and the practice of perpetuating this situation. A person is usually born into slavery because their ancestors were enslaved and their family has 'belonged' to the slave-owning family ever since.¹ The term 'descent-based slavery' is mainly used in the West African context.² The practice is also referred to as 'hereditary slavery'.³

Descent-based slavery persists in many West African communities, including in Mali,⁴ despite slavery being abolished in 1905 by the French colonial authorities.⁵ In Mali, slavery status is passed down from mother to child to ensure that future generations are born into slavery.⁶ Certain tribes and groups in Mali have historically practised descent-based slavery, enslaving certain other tribes. For example, the Bambara and Fulani in the southern and central regions are the traditional slave owners of the Bellah and Sahrawi tribes.⁷ However, the practice is thought to occur in all parts of the country.⁸

Descent-based slavery, as understood today, perpetuates economic, social and cultural discrimination and inequality. So-called 'slaves' are not usually recognised as worthy citizens and are frequently discriminated against.⁹ They are stigmatised in their communities and forced to provide labour and perform menial tasks. They might, for instance, serve elite families during ritual occasions.¹⁰ Many people of slave descent struggle to exercise their civil rights, including access to civil status documents, land ownership and education.¹¹ They experience extreme forms of exclusion, discrimination, violence and forced displacement.¹² They are at higher risk of joining Jihadi groups, which they can see as a means of self-defence and liberation, even if temporary, from the 'slave' label.¹³

There are no firm data on the number of people in descent-based slavery in Mali. However, Temedt, the Association pour la consolidation de la paix, le développement, la promotion et protection des droits humains (Association for the consolidation of peace, development, and the promotion and protection of human rights) estimates that there are 800,000 people of slave descent in Mali, out of a population of around 18 million. Approximately 200,000 people of slave descent are believed to be under the direct control of their 'masters',¹⁴ while the rest face systemic discrimination.¹⁵

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- 1 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery? <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/descent-based-slavery/>
 - 2 Pelckmans, L. (2025). Transnational digital Resistance? Collective On- and Offline Anti-Slavery Mobilisations by the Soninke Movement Ganbanaaxun Fedde in Mali, Mauritania and diaspora, 2016-2024. Slavery and Abolition (forthcoming).
 - 3 See, for example, Peyton, N. (2021). U.N urges Mali to end hereditary slavery (Reuters, 29 October): <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/un-urges-mali-to-end-hereditary-slavery-idUSKBN2HJ1FO/>
 - 4 Camara, B., Deleigne, M., Pelckmans, L., and Rodet, M. (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.
 - 5 OHCHR (2021). 'Mali: UN experts condemn increased attacks on 'descent-based slaves', deplore government's failure to act' (19 July 2021): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2021/07/mali-un-experts-condemn-increased-attacks-descent-based-slaves-deplore-governments>
 - 6 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?; Camara, B. et al. (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.
 - 7 Human Rights Council (2025). Tackling descent-based slavery in the Sahel region: https://hagamun.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/25HRC_Sahel-slavery.pdf; United States Department of State (2023). 2023 country reports on human rights practices: Mali: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mali/>
 - 8 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice: How to counter descent-based slavery in Mali (podcast): <https://worldjusticeproject.org/ruleoflaw/solutions/leveraging-informal-justice-how-counter-descent-based-slavery-mali>
 - 9 Pelckmans, L. (2025). Transnational Digital Resistance? Collective On- and Offline Anti-Slavery Mobilisations by the Soninke Movement Ganbanaaxun Fedde in Mali, Mauritania and the Diaspora, 2016-2024. Slavery & Abolition, 46(3), 741-767.
 - 10 Pelckmans, L. (2025). Transnational Digital Resistance? Collective On- and Offline Anti-Slavery Mobilisations by the Soninke Movement Ganbanaaxun Fedde in Mali, Mauritania and the Diaspora, 2016-2024. Slavery & Abolition, 46(3), 741-767.
 - 11 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.
 - 12 Rodet, M., Camara, B., Pelckmans, L. (2021). 'Mali fails to face up to the persistence of slavery'. The Conversation (15 February 2021): <https://theconversation.com/mali-fails-to-face-up-to-the-persistence-of-slavery-147636>
 - 13 Poudiougou, I. (2025). Itinéraires d'émancipations par la violence : djihad, autodéfense, foncier et mémoire d'esclavage au centre du Mali. Cahiers d'études africains, 257.
 - 14 This is also described as "active" slavery.
 - 15 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery's call for input on contemporary forms of slavery as affecting persons belonging to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities: Mauritania, Niger, and Mali (February 2022): <https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-Joint-Submission-to-SR-Slavery-Minorities-Mauritania-Niger-Mali.pdf#:~:text=Mali%20Temedt%20estimates%20that%20there%20are%20around,under%20the%20direct%20control%20of%20their%20masters>.

Until the adoption of the new Malian Penal Code in December of last year,¹⁶ Mali's national legislation failed to criminalise descent-based slavery specifically. This failing means that perpetrators have long acted with relative impunity. At most, they were charged with lesser offences, such as assault.¹⁷

The prohibition of slavery is *jus cogens*, i.e. a principle of international law from which no derogation is permitted. It is stipulated in Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Slavery is likewise prohibited under Article 5 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which states:

Every individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being and to the recognition of his legal status. All forms of exploitation and degradation of man, particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited.¹⁸

Descent-based slavery contravenes many international instruments ratified by Mali. These instruments include: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the 1926 Slavery Convention and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.¹⁹

The various manifestations of descent-based slavery also constitute serious human rights violations under Malian law. The Malian Constitution recognises the sanctity of human life (Article 1), prohibits discrimination based on social origin (Article 2), and prohibits cruel, degrading or humiliating treatment (Article 3).²⁰ The new Malian Penal Code prohibits slavery, including customs and practices such as descent-based slavery and serfdom (Article 324-15).

This report explores current trends in descent-based slavery in Mali, as well as recent responses to the practice. The report first sets out the research methods used: a desk review of recent literature and legislation, and semi-structured interviews with representatives of a government agency, an international organisation and an academic institution. The report then briefly summarises Mali's legal framework on descent-based slavery. The main section of the report presents the findings from the literature review and semi-structured interviews. It explores the following aspects of descent-based slavery: prevalence, geographic scope, people in descent-based slavery, perpetrators, forms and characteristics, exacerbating factors.

The main section of the report also explores recent responses to descent-based slavery and gaps in the response. The report concludes with a summary of the key findings and policy-oriented recommendations for strengthening Mali's response to descent-based slavery.

This report is aimed primarily at representatives of government agencies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics who are interested in strengthening the response to descent-based slavery and services for all people of slave descent.

16 République du Mali, Loi N. 2024/027 du 13 Décembre 2024 portant Code Pénal (Republic of Mali, Law N. 2024/027 on the Penal Code). See i.a. [mali-jo-2024-22-sp.pdf](#)

17 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). A submission from Anti-Slavery International and Temedt to the List of Issues for the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

18 African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981): https://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/docs/African_Charter_Human_Peoples_Rights.pdf

19 Lawyers Without Borders (LWBC), Malian Association for Human Rights (AMDH), and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali. African Commission of Human and People's Rights 71st Ordinary Session: https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/lwbc-amdh-fidh_achpr_note_on_descent-based_slavery_english_final_version.pdf

20 Lawyers Without Borders et al (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali.

Section 2: Methodology

Literature and legislation review

The consultant collected and reviewed literature on descent-based slavery in Mali published between 2020 and 2025 in French and English. She identified relevant sources by searching academic databases. The consultant also conducted manual searches of the publications pages of key agencies' websites. The literature review included journal articles, reports and briefing papers, as well as recent media reports, documentaries and a podcast.

The consultant also reviewed international, regional and national legislation on descent-based slavery in Mali.

Semi-structured interviews

The consultant conducted three semi-structured interviews with a representative of an international organisation, a criminal justice practitioner and an academic in Mali. Other interviews were sought but not conducted for various reasons, including potential interviewees' time and capacity constraints.

The interviews began by exploring the interviewees' work related to descent-based slavery. They went on to explore their knowledge and experiences of the prevalence, forms and characteristics of the phenomenon, people of slave descent, perpetrators and recent responses (including any gaps). The interviewees were asked to share their recommendations for improving the policy and programmatic response to descent-based slavery. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

The research was conducted over a four-week period in June and July 2025.

Section 3: Legal framework on descent-based slavery in Mali

Mali is a signatory to many international human rights instruments, including the core United Nations human rights treaties and various regional African human rights agreements. They include:

- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol
- the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
- the Kampala Convention on Internally Displaced Persons

Mali's legal framework on descent-based slavery is fragmented and lacks a specific and comprehensive law criminalising and tackling slavery. While the 2023 Constitution²¹ guarantees liberty and states, in article 4, that “no one shall be subjected to torture, slavery, or inhuman, cruel, and degrading treatment”, and the newly adopted Penal Code defines slavery as a crime against humanity and a war crime, there is no specific law prohibiting descent-based slavery. The lack of domestic legislation criminalising descent-based slavery in Mali has made it extremely difficult to punish perpetrators, secure the release of people in descent-based slavery and get redress for them.²² A comprehensive anti-slavery law has been drafted, but not yet adopted.

On 31 October 2024, the transitional Government of Mali passed a new Penal Code that includes provisions criminalising slavery.²³ On 14 December 2024, the National Transition Council approved amendments to the Penal Code that explicitly criminalise slavery and related practices, including descent-based slavery.

The newly amended Penal Code introduces 17 new articles (Articles 324-12 to 324-28) on different forms of slavery. Among the most significant is Article 324-15, which expands the traditional definition of ‘slavery’ to include customs and practices such as descent-based slavery and serfdom. These forms of bondage, not previously addressed by national legislation in Mali,

21 This was also foreseen by the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Mali.

22 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

23 Anti-Slavery International (2024) Progress towards ending slavery in Mali (2 December): <https://www.antislavery.org/latest/progress-towards-ending-slavery-in-mali/>

involve individuals being born into servitude and deprived of their rights, agency and access to land or property.²⁴

The revised Penal Code now criminalises sexual slavery and any sexual relations with a person in slavery (Article 324-14) and deems any sexual relations with an enslaved woman in a forced marriage to constitute rape (Article 324-19). Sexual relations under the guise of forced marriage, particularly when linked to enslavement (including descent-based slavery), is now considered rape. This change in the law grants legal recourse to survivors.²⁵

Other relevant national legislation includes the 1992 Labour Code and the 2012 Law on the Fight against Trafficking in Persons. The Law on Trafficking in Persons covers some aspects of slavery, but does not specifically mention descent-based slavery. The Labour Code prohibits forced labour without specifically addressing descent-based slavery.

24 Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFOD). Global forum communities discriminated on work and descent (2025). Mali criminalises slavery by descent in landmark legal reform (9 May): <https://globalforumcdwd.org/mali-criminalises-slavery-by-descent-in-landmark-legal-reform/>

25 Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFOD). Global forum communities discriminated on work and descent (2025). Mali criminalises slavery by descent in landmark legal reform.



Section 4: Current trends in descent-based slavery in Mali

Prevalence

As noted in the *Introduction* of this report, there are no firm data on the number of people in descent-based slavery in Mali. Some organisations estimate that at least 800,000 people (adults and children) are in descent-based slavery, of whom around 200,000 live under the direct control of their ‘masters’.²⁶

There are also no accurate data on the practice at the regional and local (village) levels. However, sources suggest that in 2020 there were approximately 200,000 people enslaved in the Kayes region.²⁷

Data on descent-based slavery in Mali is limited for many complex reasons: the clandestine nature of the practice means that it is under-reported; data collection efforts are inadequate (there are few, if any, surveys among high-risk populations); previous governments have been reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the practice and tackle it; and political instability, including two military coups since August 2020, has hindered data collection.²⁸

Geographic spread

According to a recent International Labour Organization (ILO) report, descent-based slavery is prevalent in the regions of Kayes, Kita and Nioro.²⁹ A document published by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) notes that the practice is also widespread in the central and northern regions of Mali, including in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal.³⁰

Descent-based slavery occurs in every region of Mali.³¹ Some regions are more affected than others in terms of how strictly the practice is applied in day-to-day life.³² Descent-based slavery is reportedly most prevalent among Mali’s nomadic Tuareg and Fulani communities in central and northern Mali, with the black Kel Tamasheq most affected.³³

One interviewee highlighted that people in descent-based slavery in the Kayes region are particularly exposed to violence at the hands of the ‘masters’.³⁴

26 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised, UN experts say. Press release (8 May 2023): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/mali-slavery-descent-must-be-criminalised-un-experts-say>; McKeown, M. (2019). Threats to human rights and the rule of law around the world require our attention. ABA Journal: https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/threats-to-human-rights-and-the-rule-of-law-around-the-world-require-our-attention#google_vignette; Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur.

27 Diallo, M. (2020). Esclavage dans la région de Kayes : une bombe à retardement. Le Jalon: <https://lejalon.com/2020/01/22/esclavage-dans-la-region-de-kayes-une-bombe-a-retardement/>; Durmaz, M. (2021). Slavery is alive in Mali and continues to wreak havoc on lives (Al Jazeera, 29 October): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/29/slavery-is-alive-in-mali-and-continues-to-wreak-havoc-on-lives>

28 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised.

29 ILO (2024). Rapport d’activité: Mission d’investigation judiciaire et communautaire, de documentation sur la pratique de l’esclavage dans les régions de Kayes, Kita et Nioro du Sahel.

30 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised.

31 Rodet, M., Camara, B., Pelckmans, L. (2021). Mali fails to face up to the persistence of slavery.

32 Interview 1: Academic.

33 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur.

34 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

People in descent-based slavery

“Descent-based slavery in Mali is rooted in the traditions and customs of certain ethnic groups, in particular the Peulh, Soninké, Sonrhaï and Malinké. The practice is also inherent to the Touareg and Arab community, where people in slavery are called ‘Bellas’”.³⁵

In the Kayes, Kita and Nioro regions of the Sahel, the Soninke, Malinke and Fulani³⁶ ethnic groups are divided into classes: the ‘nobles’, the ‘artisans’ and the ‘slaves’. The ‘slaves’ live separately from the ‘nobles’, but are directly under their control. In some regions, anyone who is not Soninke is considered a ‘descendant of slaves’. In other regions, people with surnames that are not considered to be native to the local area are considered ‘slaves’. However, as noted by a 2024 International Labour Organization report, the practice remains complex. In some regions, ‘nobles’ and ‘slaves’ have the same surnames.³⁷ Further, in some regions, while some people of slave descent ‘belong’ to a ‘noble’ family, others are ‘owned’ by the entire community.³⁸

Both men and women are affected by descent-based slavery. Women of slave descent do not have the same rights as ‘noble’ women. They are not allowed to marry outside their social class, meaning that a so-called ‘slave’ woman must marry a ‘slave’ man.³⁹ Women of slave descent are ‘owned’ by their so-called ‘master’ and are therefore at high risk of sexual exploitation.⁴⁰

All age groups are affected by descent-based slavery. Child ‘slaves’ do not, in the eyes of the ‘masters’ and others in the community, belong to their parents, but rather to the ‘masters’. Children may be prohibited from accessing education and instead forced to work (for example, in agriculture).⁴¹ They may be loaned to people in the community or given as gifts in marriage.⁴²

Perpetrators

As noted above, several ethnic groups continue to practice descent-based slavery in the Kayes, Kita and Nioro regions of the Sahel. These include the Soninke, Malinke, Sarakole, Fulani and Kakolo. Perpetrators of the practice are often ‘noble’ families who own ‘slaves’ exclusively. Other ‘slaves’ are considered to be owned not by one ‘noble’ family, but by the community.⁴³

Religious and local political leaders are also slave owners in Mali. These are people who hold positions of power and community responsibility, such as mayors, village chiefs, Imams and presidents of village associations.⁴⁴

35 Lawyers Without Borders et al (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali.

36 “Fulani” and “Peulh” refer to the same ethno-linguistic group.

37 ILO (2024). Rapport d’activité.

38 ILO (2024). Rapport d’activité.

39 ILO (2024). Rapport d’activité.

40 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

41 OHCHR (2021). ‘Mali: End to impunity for barbaric attacks on “slaves” long overdue-UN experts’ (29 October 2021): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/11/mali-end-impunity-barbaric-attacks-slaves-long-overdue-un-experts> ; Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

42 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

43 ILO (2024). Rapport d’activité.

44 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

Manifestations and characteristics

Descent-based slavery in Mali manifests in different forms. In Mali, as well as Niger and Mauritania, there are strict hierarchies based on ethnic and sometimes racial lines. Those at the top of the hierarchy are classed as 'nobles' and those at the bottom of the hierarchy are labelled 'slaves'.⁴⁵

In Mali, many people are born into a traditional 'master-slave' existence. Most people of slave descent do not know how or when their ancestors became 'slaves'. They were simply born and later found out that their families held this 'slave' status and that they too were therefore a so-called 'slave'.⁴⁶ For others, the label of 'slave' is imposed on them after migration and marriage. Newcomers to a village who have a surname unfamiliar to the community members may be automatically assigned the 'slave' label.⁴⁷ Anti-slavery advocates have also suggested that the practice is based on skin colour in some regions of Mali.⁴⁸

Descent-based slavery in Mali manifests through the social stratification of labour and the ownership of property and land. At the top of the social hierarchy, the 'nobles' are typically landowners, chiefs and Imams. At the lower end of the hierarchy, 'slaves' are assigned menial domestic tasks during ceremonies and social events. They are prohibited from owning property and land.⁴⁹ In the middle of the hierarchy are free-born people who do not own land. People in this group are at risk of falling into the lower echelon of the hierarchy and becoming slaves.

Discrimination is central to descent-based slavery. 'Slaves' are prohibited from holding positions of responsibility in their village (such as president of community bodies, parent-teacher associations or agricultural cooperatives), even if they have the relevant skills.⁵⁰

People in descent-based slavery face a lifetime of exploitation. They are treated as property by their so-called 'masters'. They work without pay, herding animals, working in the fields or in their masters' homes, often in very isolated places. They can be inherited, sold or given away as gifts, for example as wedding presents.⁵¹ Many have little to no freedom of movement and are banned from travelling to other villages or even visiting the market.⁵² Dominance over people of slave descent is particularly evident during certain social events. At such events, so-called 'slaves' are forced to do tasks such as slaughtering animals, cooking and performing slave dances during ceremonies.⁵³

In a recent report, Mali's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) detailed human rights violations and abuses related to descent-based slavery. These abuses include acts of violence, assault, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, public humiliation, insults, intimidation, kidnapping and rape committed routinely by 'masters' against people of slave descent.⁵⁴

45 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

46 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

47 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Slaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

48 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

49 Lawyers without borders et al (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali.

50 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

51 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

52 Interview 3: Criminal justice practitioner.

53 Lawyers Without Borders et al (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali.

54 Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme (CNDH) (2021). Etude sur les besoins et attentes des victimes de l'esclavage par ascendance à Kayes: <https://cndhmali.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Rapport-de-la-CNDH-sur-lesclavage-VF-002-2.pdf>

Many people of slave descent are prevented from gaining the skills and education needed to participate freely in society. They are also prevented from obtaining the identification documents needed to access their basic civil rights, such as the rights to vote, go to school or open a bank account. Because their births are not formally registered, many people of slave descent cannot prove who their father is or even their date of birth.⁵⁵ The resulting inaptitude and legal incapacity keeps them dependent on and bound to their 'masters'.

“ They are discriminated against, also in terms of their political rights. They cannot vote. They are unable to take part in society as fully fledged citizens.”

Criminal justice practitioner interviewee

According to a recent survey of displaced people in the Kayes region who had escaped slavery (105 men and 99 women):

- 58% reported having been subjected to verbal abuse and threats by their 'masters'
- 47% reported being deprived of access to education
- 43% reported that they were unable to access healthcare
- 41% reported experiencing assault and battery
- 31% reported that they had been tortured
- 31% reported that their personal belongings had been confiscated⁵⁶

Women of slave descent are disproportionately negatively affected by descent-based slavery. They are subjected to extreme forms of sexual violence and forced marriage and denied education and healthcare.⁵⁷ Women and girls often face sexual abuse and rape at the hands of the 'masters' and have to bear their children. In turn, their children will also be owned by the 'masters'.⁵⁸ Cases of sexual abuse of women in descent-based slavery have been reported in Lany and Bafoulabe.⁵⁹

Children of slave descent are discriminated against in school. Those so-called 'slave' children who are allowed to go to school are forced to perform tasks in schools that are considered menial (such as sanitation duties or cleaning the blackboard). These tasks are never assigned to other children.⁶⁰

'Slave' children can be taken away from their mothers at an early age and put to work without ever attending school.⁶¹

As highlighted by Lawyers Without Borders Canada (LWBC), the Malian Association for Human Rights (AMDH) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), despite commonalities between the forms and characteristics of descent-based slavery across Mali, the practice varies

55 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

56 Camara, B. et al. (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.

57 Global forum communities discriminated on work and descent (2025). Mali criminalises slavery by descent in landmark legal reform.

58 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

59 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

60 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

61 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

from one region to another and from one area or village to another within the same region.⁶² For example, in the north of the country, there is a rigid caste system and the freedom of movement of people in descent-based slavery in some northern regions is severely restricted. In other regions, descent-based slavery manifests as domestic servitude. In others still, people of slave descent have relative autonomy and are included in village life.⁶³

Factors exacerbating descent-based slavery

Social acceptance of the practice by people in authority is a key factor that exacerbates descent-based slavery. In October 2021, United Nations experts responded to ongoing attacks against people of slave descent in the Kayes region, highlighting their persistence and that “descent-based slavery is still socially accepted by some influential politicians, traditional leaders, law enforcement officials and judicial authorities”.⁶⁴

People’s desire to gain economically from descent-based slavery is another key factor. One interviewee highlighted that ‘nobles’ themselves often lack livelihood skills. Many ‘masters’ are entirely reliant on people of slave descent to cultivate their land and maintain their income:

“What we have found is that it’s (descent-based slavery) a source of revenue for the masters. Their land is being cultivated by the victims, so the masters make economic gain from the practice.”

Criminal justice practitioner interviewee

Conflict over land, water and other natural resources is increasingly exacerbating descent-based slavery. Many people in Mali (including people of slave descent) rely on limited resources for their survival. This situation has led to more conflicts at the community level. In response, the elite classes can ban people of slave descent from accessing these resources or eject them from the community.⁶⁵ These conflicts therefore worsen the living conditions of people of slave descent and lead to their forced displacement. In the past, traditional leaders acted as mediators in these conflicts and often found resolutions. However, they have reportedly lost their ability to defuse tensions in recent years.⁶⁶

Climate change is also a relevant factor because access to land in Mali is managed by local elite groups. As land degradation in the ecologically fragile Sahelian zone worsens due to climate change, ‘masters’ are less and less willing to allow ‘slaves’ to farm the land.⁶⁷ Violent clashes have occurred when people of slave descent have attempted to do so. For example, in July 2021, people from Makhadougou village, eastern Kayes region, tried to stop people they considered ‘slaves’ from working their fields. They attacked them with machetes and rifles, resulting in 12 people of slave descent being seriously injured.⁶⁸

62 Lawyers Without Borders et al (2022). Note on the persistence of descent-based slavery in Mali.

63 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

64 OHCHR (2021). Mali: End to impunity for barbaric attacks on “slaves” long overdue – UN experts.

65 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

66 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

67 Camara, B. et al, (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.

68 OHCHR (2021). ‘Mali: UN experts condemn increased attacks on ‘descent-based slaves’ (19 July 2021).

Conflict and political instability in Mali are also important factors. On the one hand, the instability caused by the recent conflict may have provided some people in descent-based slavery a brief opportunity to flee their 'masters'. However, perpetrators have subsequently taken advantage of the lack of state authority to reassert dominance over communities of slave descent. According to reports, this is particularly the case in Kayes, where 'masters' have held violent ceremonies to reinstate the subjugation of people of slave descent.⁶⁹ Anti-slavery advocates suggest that recent crises have only served to increase the number of people enslaved across the country.⁷⁰

The interviewees noted, however, that while these factors do exacerbate descent-based slavery, the key factor that allows the practice to continue unabated is Mali's class structure. Under this social structure, people are split into the elite class, the middle class and the slave class. While this structure remains in place, people of slave descent will continue to be victimised for generations to come.

“The key issue is the social structure in Mali.”

Academic interviewee

Consequences of seeking liberation

Escape from situations of slavery and liberation from the 'slave' label are extremely difficult for people in descent-based slavery. One interviewee explained that there are few options for people to escape descent-based slavery. They can wait for radical social change (a change of government and dismantling of the social hierarchy). They can join a Jihadi group such as Al-Qaida (and gain a certain status within the group and protection by virtue of being a member). They can excel in school, migrate to a large city or foreign country, become wealthy and leave the 'slave' label behind.

“The only real way (of achieving sustained liberation) is radical social change, by completely changing the structure of society in Mali.”

Academic interviewee

As highlighted by scholar Ibrahima Poudiougou, due to the dearth of escape options, some people in descent-based slavery have joined Jihadi groups (primarily Al-Qaida) as a way to escape and gain temporary protection as a member of the group.⁷¹ People of slave descent who join Jihadi groups hope that, in the long-term, the groups will be successful in dismantling the local political structure and overthrowing the elite.⁷²

People of slave descent who resist the label of 'slave' and seek liberation are often subjected to social isolation and restrictions on their movements by their 'masters'.⁷³ Refusal of slavery can also lead to reprisals. Such reprisals include: banning people who refuse the 'slave' label from farming cultivated land; blocking them from accessing basic social services; subjecting them to physical

69 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur

70 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

71 Poudiougou, I. (2025). Itinéraires d'émancipations par la violence.

72 Poudiougou, I. (2025). Itinéraires d'émancipations par la violence.

73 Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme (CNDH) (2021). Etude sur les besoins et attentes des victimes de l'esclavage par ascendance à Kayes.

and sexual violence (sometimes leading to serious injury or death); and forcibly displacing them.⁷⁴ Extreme physical violence against people who seek liberation is often perpetrated by young people in the community.⁷⁵

In 2020, four people who refused the status of 'slave' were murdered in the village of Diandjourné in Nioro.⁷⁶ One interviewee highlighted that physical violence against people of slave descent escalated around 2018, in particular in the Kayes region, when people of slave descent demanded their freedom.⁷⁷ Not only were these people subjected to extreme violence, but they were also prevented from accessing any land. Many were forcibly displaced:

“Those who try to achieve liberation... there is physical aggression as well as impacts on their access to land. They are forbidden to work in the fields. They are forcibly removed from the village. We see some murders of these victims of descent-based slavery.”

International organisation interviewee

People of slave descent who seek liberation and who wish to remain in their community are excluded from daily village life and events. They have low to no access to key resources such as water, land and basic consumer goods. 'Masters' are quick to reclaim any land or property that may have belonged to these people.⁷⁸ The children of people who seek liberation are prevented from going to school.⁷⁹

People of slave descent who have disputes with the local elite over access to land and other livelihood resources, even if they do not explicitly seek to resist their position as 'slave', are often subjected to violence and forced out of the community.⁸⁰

When people of slave descent are denied their civil rights, blocked from accessing property and land, and subjected to physical and sexual violence, alongside other abuses, they have no choice but to flee. This has led to the displacement of hundreds of people.

Between 2020 and 2022, Lottie Pelckmans and Marie Rodet conducted research among forcibly displaced people of slave descent from the village of Mambiti in Western Mali. They found that these people had fled their communities due to social causes, including total exclusion from vital resources (water wells, medical care, shops, land), as well as ongoing discrimination.⁸¹

While there is no firm data on the number of people of slave descent who have been displaced, in the Kayes region of Mali, for example, violence against people of slave descent has resulted in

74 Interview 3 : Criminal justice practitioner. See also Expert Indépendant sur la Situation des Droits de l'Homme au Mali (2022). Situation des droits de l'Homme au Mali, A/HRC/49/94, 17 mars 2022, para. 40 : "Between January 1 and December 31, 2021, MINUSMA documented at least nine incidents resulting in at least one death and eighty-one injuries, of which seven were women. Twice as many people, mostly considered slaves, were injured in 2021 as in 2020. The most recent incident, which occurred in the village of Souroubiré in the Kayes region on September 28-29, 2021, resulted in one death and at least twelve injuries among those considered slaves. [translated]": <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/situation-des-droits-de-l-homme-au-mali-ahrc4994-advance-unedited-version> ; ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

75 Diallo, M. (2020). Esclavage dans la région de Kayes.

76 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

77 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

78 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

79 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

80 Rodet, M., Camara, B., Pelckmans, L. (2021). Mali fails to face up to the persistence of slavery.

81 Pelckmans, L., and Rodet, M. (n.d). Slavery, forced displacement, and climate change in Western Mali: <https://www.diiis.dk/files/media/document/lotte%20pelckmans%20and%20marie%20rodet-slavery%2C%20forced%20displacement%20and%20climate%20change%20in%20western%20mali.pdf>

serious injuries and hundreds of people being forced to flee their homes.⁸² There are reportedly nearly 2,300 displaced people of slave descent in Mambri, Bamako (Children's City), Kabala City and Krénis.⁸³

People of slave descent who are displaced continue to be at high risk of further exploitation, including people trafficking. Women and girls are at particularly high risk of sexual exploitation because their parents often send them to work as domestic workers to financially support their displaced family.⁸⁴

Furthermore, people who escape the communities where they were victimised often continue to live at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This makes it nearly impossible for them to escape the poverty trap.⁸⁵ Many people who have escaped active slavery find it difficult to adapt to independent life and find decent work. Despite their escape, many still face the stigma of being from the 'slave' class and experience discrimination in their new community.⁸⁶ Furthermore, despite their escape, people of slave descent still have little to no access to economic opportunities or their civil rights.⁸⁷

Those few who do manage to escape the stigma of being a former 'slave' do so by suppressing their experience entirely.⁸⁸ This means no one in their new community knows about their past, including their previous 'slave' label. These people are typically the few survivors of descent-based slavery who excel in school and migrate to a foreign country in Europe or elsewhere. There, they are able to become wealthy through owning businesses. However, they are not entirely liberated. They are still considered to be of the 'slave' class by the Malian diaspora in their new country. They must still marry within their class and they are still not allowed to own land in their home village in Mali.⁸⁹

“Getting out is not a completed process... if you go back to the village your status has not changed. Even if you have money. They don't care about money, only your status when you were born.”

Academic interviewee

Some people of slave descent, including those who have escaped active slavery,⁹⁰ who migrate (usually within Mali, to neighbouring villages) miss their home and hope to return to their community. However, if they continue to reject the 'slave' label, they often do not go home due to ongoing stigma⁹¹ or fear of violence on their return.⁹²

82 Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised

83 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

84 Rodet, M. et al (2021). Mali fails to face up to the persistence of slavery.

85 Camara, B. et al, (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.

86 Anti-Slavery International (n.d). What is descent-based slavery?

87 Interview 3: Criminal justice practitioner.

88 Camara, B. et al, (2021). Descent-based slavery as a form of contemporary slavery.

89 Interview 1: Academic.

90 People who were enslaved and have broken free from their "masters".

91 Interview 1: Academic.

92 Diallo, M. (2020). Esclavage dans la région de Kayes.

Section 5: Recent efforts to tackle descent-based slavery in Mali

The Government of Mali has recently made laudable efforts to tackle descent-based slavery. It passed a new Penal Code in 2024 with provisions to criminalise slavery and related practices, including descent-based slavery.⁹³ As highlighted by Lawyers without Borders Canada, this is an “unprecedented step forward that could give hope to the 800,000 victims of this harmful traditional practice.”⁹⁴

In an effort to strengthen regional legislation, in August 2020, the regional government in Kayes signed a draft charter to end descent-based slavery.⁹⁵

There have also been efforts to investigate and prosecute people perpetrating descent-based slavery in Mali. In the four years from 2020 to 2024, statistics from the courts of Kayes, Bafoulabé and Diéma showed that 121 cases were brought before the courts. Of these cases 51 were judged and 107 people were convicted. Given that slavery was not an offence under the Penal Code at that time, prosecutions were based on related offences, such as assault and battery, violence by assault, and home invasion. Convictions were handed down based on evidence that included victim and witness testimonies and written evidence from social media.⁹⁶

The first special session of the Court of Assizes (the court that hears serious criminal felony cases) in 2023 focused on descent-based slavery and prosecuting and convicting human traffickers, including for descent-based slavery crimes.⁹⁷ The court prosecuted 79 alleged traffickers in three cases. It convicted 47 traffickers for descent-based slavery crimes under Penal Code provisions on assault, murder, ethnic discrimination, arson and battery. The court acquitted 32 defendants, gave 15 traffickers fully suspended sentences and otherwise sentenced 32 traffickers. Their sentences ranged from two years' imprisonment to the death penalty. The court also ordered XOF 90 million (£117,103)⁹⁸ in restitution in one of the cases.⁹⁹ Many of those convicted were found guilty of descent-based slavery crimes.¹⁰⁰

The government has also set up various bodies to tackle descent-based slavery and improve the reporting of rights violations. They include:

- the National Human Rights Commission, which has a mandate to tackle slavery
- the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices
- the National Coalition to Combat Slavery (Coalition Nationale de Lutte contre l'Esclavage au Mali – a coalition of NGOs).¹⁰¹

93 Global forum communities discriminated on work and descent (2025). Mali criminalises slavery by descent in landmark legal reform.

94 Lawyers without Borders Canada (2024). Media release: <https://asfcanada.ca/en/medias/slavery-by-descent-officially-outlawed-by-the-malian-penal-code-a-historic-step-forward-for-human-rights-in-mali/#>

95 US Department of State (2021). 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mali.

96 ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

97 United States Department of State (2023). Trafficking in persons report: Mali: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/mali/#:~:text=Former%20>

98 Currency conversion conducted on 20 June 2025.

99 United States Department of State (2023). Trafficking in persons report: Mali.

100 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Mali: Slavery by descent must be criminalised.

101 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur.

In 2024 between April and June, 10,415 human rights violations and abuses were documented and recorded by Mali's protection monitoring system. This is an increase of 19.74% compared to the 8,698 in the previous quarter.¹⁰² However, it is not known how many of these violations involve descent-based slavery, nor what the outcomes of the monitoring of these violations was in terms of investigation, prosecution and redress for their victims.

The Minister of Reconciliation has also worked to raise awareness of descent-based slavery among communities in Mali.¹⁰³ Key activities include awareness-raising in communities, mediating disputes and working on reconciliation within communities.¹⁰⁴ According to one interviewee, there have been some recent success stories where displaced people of slave descent have been supported to return to their communities. This was made possible by ongoing awareness-raising and community reconciliation between 'masters' and these people of slave descent.¹⁰⁵

The International Labour Organization, with Temedt and Anti-Slavery International, has a project (2023–2025) focused on tackling descent-based slavery in Mali. The project has four objectives:

- raise awareness of descent-based slavery
- strengthen legislation and policy
- strengthen access to justice for people of slave descent
- improve the economic empowerment of people of slave descent

Civil society is also working to tackle descent-based slavery in Mali. For example, the equality movement Ganbanaaxun Fedde (Gambana) connects people of slave descent from Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia via social media. The aim of the movement is to actively resist descent-based slavery in West Africa.¹⁰⁶ The movement has approximately 70,000 members.¹⁰⁷

The American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative has also been actively involved in tackling descent-based slavery in Mali, particularly through collaborations with local organisations and civil society groups. The Rule of Law Initiative's anti-slavery efforts have focused on strengthening laws and legal institutions in Mali and improving people of slave descent's access to justice. It does this by providing pro bono legal representation and setting up legal aid clinics. The organisation also raises awareness about descent-based slavery in Mali.¹⁰⁸

The Malian civil society organisation Temedt also works to tackle descent-based slavery in Mali. Temedt was set up by survivors of slavery in 2006 to promote democracy and peace. The organisation's key objectives are to eradicate slavery and end the marginalisation of people of slave descent.¹⁰⁹ Temedt has recently run sessions in communities in Kayes to raise awareness about descent-based slavery to encourage communities to abandon the practice.¹¹⁰

102 Project 21 (2024). Note de Protection Avril-Juin 2024: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-note-de-protection-avril-juin-2024>

103 Anti-Slavery International, SOS Esclaves, Temedt, and Timidria (2022). Response to the Special Rapporteur.

104 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

105 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

106 Pelckmans, L. (2025). Transnational digital Resistance?

107 Durmaz, M. (2021). Slavery is alive in Mali and continues to wreak havoc on lives (Al Jazeera, 29 October): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/29/slavery-is-alive-in-mali-and-continues-to-wreak-havoc-on-lives>

108 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

109 Temedt (facebook page): <https://www.facebook.com/people/Association-Temedt-Mali/100064787016559/>

110 United States Department of State (2023). 2023 country reports on human rights practices: Mali.

Alongside other civil society organisations, Temedt and partners have provided rehabilitation and livelihood support, and negotiated access to land for people of slave descent.

International organisations and NGOs have endeavoured to strengthen the evidence on the prevalence of descent-based slavery in Mali. The International Labour Organization, Anti-Slavery International and Temedt recently conducted research in Northern and Western Mali on the forms and prevalence of slavery and the support needs of people of slave descent.¹¹¹

Academics have sought to raise awareness of descent-based slavery. For example, Marie Rodet and colleagues led the Sharia Batu project in Mali. This research project focused on raising awareness about the history of internal slavery in Mali and its ongoing effects on communities. The project harnessed oral history and community engagement to tackle the stigma associated with descent-based slavery and improve access to justice.¹¹²

As a result of these various activities, some internally displaced people of slave descent, including those who escaped active slavery, have successfully integrated into other communities. The work of government agencies, international organisations and civil society organisations has provided people of slave descent with support and rehabilitation services, access to land to farm and other livelihood support.¹¹³

Gaps and challenges in the response

Despite the Government of Mali's recent efforts, descent-based slavery and the associated violence persists. Anti-slavery advocates and scholars have identified key challenges and gaps in the response. They centre on gaps in the criminal justice response, corruption, inadequate data collection, the lack of capacity and resources to support people of slave descent and the failure to guarantee the civil rights of people of slave descent.

Mali's criminal justice response to descent-based slavery is criticised in the United States Department of State 'Trafficking in persons' reports. The reports highlight that the 'piecemeal' approach to criminalising slavery in Mali has made it difficult for victims to get justice.¹¹⁴ Prosecutors have charged most descent-based slavery cases as misdemeanour offences, leading to low penalties that are not commensurate with the crime. Government interference has reportedly led to cases being dismissed.¹¹⁵ Such interference includes threats and intimidation of victims and witnesses.¹¹⁶ Those cases that have been prosecuted moved extremely slowly through the courts.¹¹⁷

While the Penal Code has recently been amended to criminalise descent-based slavery, one interviewee noted that criminal justice actors lack awareness of the new articles. The interviewee identified a need for comprehensive and regular training to ensure that all lawyers, prosecutors and judges are fully cognisant of the amended legislation.¹¹⁸

111 See ILO (2024). Rapport d'activité.

112 SOAS University of London (n.d). Changing awareness of internal slavery in Mali: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/changing-awareness-internal-slavery-mali/#:~:text=Research%20conducted%20by%20Dr%20Marie,favour%20of%20the%20Malian%20claimant.>

113 Interview 3: Criminal justice practitioner.

114 US Department of State (2021). 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mali: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/mali/#:~:text=Law%20enforcement%20continued%20to%20lack,for%20the%20second%20consecutive%20year.>

115 US Department of Labor (2020). Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports: Mali: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2020/Mali.pdf ; US Department of State (2020). 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mali: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mali/>.

116 US Department of State (2020). 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mali.

117 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice

118 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

Despite officials in Kayes signing the draft charter to eradicate descent-based slavery in 2020, violence against people of slave descent has continued in the Kayes region.¹¹⁹

Successive governments have been criticised for only actively responding to incidents involving high levels of violence against people of slave descent. One interviewee explained that the government response has been reactive rather than proactive. Given that the government often relies on the votes of members of the elite class to keep it in power, a strong response to descent-based slavery may lead to the government being ousted. It is therefore easier to only respond to the most heinous acts of violence.

“*Their own political legitimacy could be challenged.*”

Academic interviewee

However, one interviewee noted that the current transition government, which is not reliant on political popularity and the votes of the local elite, provides an opportunity to strengthen the response to descent-based slavery. The recent flurry of legislative and other activity to tackle descent-based slavery has occurred since the transition government took power.¹²⁰

“*The current government, which is a transition government, is an opportunity for the protection of victims, and is also an opportunity for abandoning the practice (of descent-based slavery) altogether. With this government there have been some important actions, the first of which has been the criminalisation of descent-based slavery.*”

International organisation interviewee

Corruption and criminal justice actors' traditional views on descent-based slavery further hinder redress for victims. Scholar Lottie Pelckmans argues that court cases are prone to corruption and have not favoured social justice for people of slave descent.¹²¹ Many officials claim that people in situations of slavery are not 'slaves', but participants engaged in traditional practices.¹²² Other officials prefer to simply ignore the practice.¹²³ One interviewee explained the reasons for this: many lawyers, prosecutors and judges in Mali are from the elite class of 'nobles'. They are therefore not interested in abolishing the practice or liberating people in descent-based slavery.¹²⁴

Anti-slavery activists have been arrested and detained for advocating against the practice and defending forcibly displaced people of slave descent.¹²⁵

Another criticism is of the lack of support provided to victims. Anti-slavery organisations argue that the Government of Mali has not adequately protected or supported people in descent-based slavery. People of slave descent who have been forced from their homes and land receive little

119 Durmaz, M. (2021). Slavery is alive in Mali and continues to wreak havoc on lives (Al Jazeera, 29 October): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/29/slavery-is-alive-in-mali-and-continues-to-wreak-havoc-on-lives>

120 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

121 Pelckmans, L. (2025). Transnational digital Resistance?

122 Camara, B., Durst-Lee, L., Pelckmans, L., and Rodet, M. (2021). The fight against descent-based slavery in Mali.

123 Rodet, M., Camara, B., Pelckmans, L. (2021). Pourquoi 'l'escalavage par ascendance' subsiste encore en Mali. The Conversation (March 11, 2021).

124 Interview 1: Academic.

125 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

state support.¹²⁶ A key challenge in strengthening support for people of slave descent (such as shelter, psychosocial counselling, livelihood skills support) is the lack of state funding available for such activities.¹²⁷

Similarly, until recently, there were few international organisations working on descent-based slavery in Mali. However, one interviewee highlighted that in the past decade there has been an increase in anti-slavery initiatives by international organisations, as well as the government and civil society:

“With the involvement also of the authorities we can see that from 2016 onwards, descent-based slavery has become a national issue and no longer just a community issue, and that is when we saw a number of civil society organisations joined and supported us that became interested in the fight against this practice.”

Criminal justice practitioner interviewee

The ongoing conflict in northern Mali has further hampered efforts to end the practice and support people of slave descent.¹²⁸ It has made it difficult for anti-slavery advocates to travel to regions affected by descent-based slavery. This has led to major challenges when it comes to providing people of slave descent, including those who have escaped slavery, with the support they need.¹²⁹

Awareness is also lacking in the country. Many people of slave descent are unaware of their rights and how to access legal aid and support from the government and civil society organisations.¹³⁰ There is a need for a comprehensive advocacy plan to strengthen people's knowledge and awareness of issues related to descent-based slavery.¹³¹

The civil rights of people of slave descent continue to be denied. The continued failure to register births in communities where descent-based slavery is practised means the civil status of people of slave descent is not recognised. This makes it extremely difficult for these people to access their civil, economic, social and cultural rights, such as education and political participation.¹³² Not having birth registration documents is reportedly a major factor that stops people of slave descent from fleeing exploitation and discrimination, and seeking help and redress.¹³³

Finally, there is a lack of data on the prevalence and characteristics of descent-based slavery. This data gap makes it hard for government agencies and civil society organisations to identify people in descent-based slavery and provide legal aid, medical care, psychosocial counselling and other support. It also hinders the development of evidence-based policy responses.¹³⁴

126 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

127 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

128 Reports indicate that the prevalence of descent-based slavery has increased since the conflict began in 2012: US Department of Labor (2020). Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports: Mali: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2020/Mali.pdf.

129 Anti-Slavery International (2019). The difficult path to freedom: 10 years of work to eradicate slavery in West Africa, p. 27: <https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AntiSlavery-Report-english.pdf>

130 World Justice Project (n.d). Leveraging informal justice.

131 Interview 2: International organisation representative.

132 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

133 Anti-Slavery International (2019). The difficult path to freedom.

134 Anti-Slavery International, and Temedt (2024). A submission from Anti-Slavery International and Temedt to the List of Issues for the UN Human Rights Committee's examination of the third periodic report of Mali.

Section 6: Conclusion and recommendations

This report has explored current trends in descent-based slavery and responses to the practice. It has briefly summarised the legal framework on descent-based slavery in Mali, highlighting recent amendments to the Penal Code that have criminalised descent-based slavery. The report has discussed the prevalence of descent-based slavery; where it is practised; who it affects; who perpetrates it; its forms and characteristics; factors that exacerbate the practice; and the consequences of seeking liberation for people of slave descent. The report has also explored current and recent criminal justice and other responses to descent-based slavery, and highlighted persistent gaps in this response.

Despite recent efforts to strengthen the legal framework on descent-based slavery in Mali, the practice persists across the country. People of all genders and ages are affected by descent-based slavery. They are denied their civil rights and access to land and property. They are often subjected to physical and sexual violence. Those who seek liberation and who reject the 'slave' label face severe reprisals, most notably isolation, violence and forced displacement. Those who are displaced are at heightened risk of further exploitation due to their position of vulnerability. Such exploitation may include human trafficking.

Descent-based slavery cannot be abolished through legal solutions alone. There is a need for comprehensive and ongoing training for criminal justice professionals, political leaders and others in positions of authority (such as mayors and other local and traditional leaders), i.e. the people who should be at the forefront of identifying cases and referring victims to legal aid and support.

There is a clear need for extensive awareness-raising among communities. Such awareness raising should ensure community members understand that descent-based slavery is illegal. It should provide information about the rights of people of slave descent (to freedom, legal aid, protection and rehabilitation support, redress etc.) and where people in descent-based slavery can get help to flee exploitation or receive support once they have fled. Training and awareness raising efforts should aim to tackle existing social structures and the social norms that accept and perpetuate descent-based slavery. They should seek to eradicate discriminatory attitudes at all levels of society. These changes will then need to be 'embedded' in social norms and social structures.

This report concludes with a series of forward-looking policy recommendations to strengthen the response of the Government of Mali, international organisations and civil society organisations to descent-based slavery:

- Widely disseminate recent amendments to the Penal Code criminalising descent-based slavery to all communities, criminal justice system actors and people in positions of authority at the local level (such as mayors and other traditional leaders). This can be done through a multi-pronged, multi-platform training and awareness-raising campaign, including:
 - face-to-face training with representatives of government agencies and civil society;
 - social media campaigns;
 - community lectures, workshops and other events.

People of slave descent should be invited to contribute to the design and delivery of these activities.

- Swiftly adopt, implement and enforce the draft comprehensive anti-slavery law, including provisions on prevention, rehabilitation and redress (in addition to those criminalising the practice). All criminal justice actors should be informed of the new law through ongoing training and awareness raising. Following the adoption of the law, a national committee against slavery should be set up to lead a nationwide effort to end slavery, including descent-based slavery.
- Enforce other relevant legislation, such as laws on the minimum wage, non-discrimination and the right to organise.
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute cases of descent-based slavery, ensuring that penalties are commensurate with the crime. Investigations and prosecutions should be expedited as far as possible.
- Adopt national plans of action and standard operating procedures to tackle descent-based slavery and discrimination. The plans, lasting five years, should include activity plans and measurable objectives.
- To raise awareness among young people, teach primary and secondary school children about the history of slavery and historical efforts to abolish slavery. The curriculum should also include lessons designed to promote non-discrimination and inclusion among children.
- Proactively screen populations at higher risk of descent-based slavery. All people potentially in situations of slavery should be referred to support services and given immediate access to medical care, psychosocial counselling, shelter, legal aid and basic services.
- Offer people who have escaped descent-based slavery livelihood support once they are ready. This could include interest-free microcredit to start a business, access to arable land (to lease or purchase) and livelihood skills training. Dedicated state funds should be set up for rehabilitation and livelihood support for people who have escaped slavery.
- Increase efforts to prevent victimisation and to break the cycle of descent-based slavery. As part of this:
 - Improve birth registration mechanisms;
 - Introduce new measures to ensure that all people of slave descent are provided with guarantees on land ownership (including land owned by their ancestors);
 - Identify and remove barriers to accessing decent employment, education and social services.

- Improve the livelihood options of the 'masters'. While people from the noble class have few economic options other than profiting from forced labour on their land, they will not be incentivised to end descent-based slavery. Livelihood skills training and access to livelihood options should therefore also target the elite.
- Increase peace and reconciliation efforts – led by the government with support from civil society organisations – to promote peaceful coexistence between people of different classes and ethnic groups. These efforts should tackle the social structures and social norms that accept and perpetuate descent-based slavery, discrimination against people of slave descent, and discrimination. Efforts at the community level should work to change social norms and ensure the sustainability of a new social contract.
- Significantly strengthen data collection. Trained enumerators should accompany those screening populations at higher risk of descent-based slavery to gather data, including:
 - the number of suspected cases of descent-based slavery
 - the age of the people affected
 - their gender
 - their experiences of exploitation.
- Analyse and disseminate the data in the form of a national report on descent-based slavery. The report should be widely shared with relevant agencies (government agencies, international organisations and civil society) to inform the response to descent-based slavery.

Finally, more research is needed to better understand the causes and characteristics of descent-based slavery. Studies should be conducted to understand the connections between descent-based slavery and contextual drivers, such as climate change, land erosion and conflict. Longitudinal research should be conducted to understand and document people of slave descent's experiences of exploitation, attempts at liberation, the criminal justice system and longer-term freedom. New measures to tackle descent-based slavery – including legislation (i.e. the new Penal Code and the new (not yet adopted) anti-slavery law), training and awareness programmes, and service provision – should be vigorously monitored and evaluated. The lessons learned about 'what works' (and what does not) should be widely shared among anti-slavery advocates in Mali and neighbouring West African countries.



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**anti-
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