



The fight against descent-based slavery in Mali

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Slavery existed in the Sahel before the Transatlantic Slave Trade and endured beyond its abolitions. To this day.

■n September 1, 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, four anti-slavery activists were murdered in western Mali for their work against descent-based slavery—a form of slavery considered hereditary, which in its worst forms manifests in forced labor without pay, denial of education, and civil rights abuses. This practice has a long history in colonial and contemporary Mali and West Africa where people with alleged “enslaved ancestors” live at the bottom of the social ladder, facing discrimination and social exclusion on a daily basis. As forced migrants and newcomers escaping wars or economic deprivation, having been sold into slavery or not, their ancestors were ascribed the status to be treated as a slave by those in power.

In 2017, the anti-slavery group, Gambana, was formed to fight systematic discrimination and violence mainly among the Soninke, an ethnic group in several West African countries. Activists denounce the anachronistic and demeaning use of the word “kome” (slave) and the worst forms of exploitation this gives way to in some settings. Their protest generated a violent backlash: since 2018 more than 3,000 Malians with ascribed “slave status” have fled slavery-related violence in the Kayes region. Activists and members

of the movement have also been attacked and are threatened in several localities in the Kayes region and beyond, yet the state and global community have remained largely silent.

Slavery existed in the Sahel before the Transatlantic Slave Trade and endured beyond its abolitions. In the 19th century, Kayes was a major transit zone of slave caravans and experienced an expansion of internal slavery through war and conflict. French colonial authorities abolished the internal slave trade in 1905 as they searched to recruit liberated slaves for forced labor. They soon turned a blind eye on the continuation of what they called “domestic slavery,” pretending it had simply transformed into salary contract work thanks to the colonial legislation. Indeed, they feared that true abolition would destabilize local slavery-based economies and prevent full colonial control of labor and taxation. Thus, descendants of those enslaved continued to inherit “slave status” and their labor continued to be controlled by the local historical ruling class with the complicity of the colonial state, a system that allowed historical hierarchies to persist to present day.

Despite the lack of implementation of the 1905 abolition decree on the ground, some formerly enslaved managed to take their destinies into their own hands, escaping a violent institution to live freely in independent communities. Although the region experienced successive waves of emancipation in the colonial and postcolonial era, descent-based slavery continued under disguised forms of kinship, marriage, and adoption/fosterage. Today, poverty and discrimination continue to exclude Malians with ascribed “slave status” from social mobility, as highlighted by the Benbere blog campaign #MaliSansEsclaves. Both past and present, some victims of descent-based slavery have found in migration a way of escaping slavery.

Whether living in France or Mali, as first, second, or third generation immigrants, transnationally imposed social “embargos” are used to punish those who try to change this social order. For example, when youth in the diaspora want to marry outside of the “right” social group, their relatives back home can be punished severely for such a transgression and will very likely be denied access to vital village resources (water, land, market, shops, etc.), which can lead to forced displacement.

Slavery has never been criminalized in postcolonial Mali. In 2012, Mali passed a law criminalizing human trafficking. However, plans to pass a law criminalizing descent-based slavery in 2016 failed to materialize; the Malian government appears unable or unwilling to act in support of those affected by descent-based slavery. Many officials claim that victims are not “slaves,” but participants in “traditional” practices. As long as descent-based slavery is not criminalized in Mali, prosecuting slavery-related abuses will prove difficult.

A protective legal framework and awareness campaigns are also crucial to support these communities to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation. Forced displacement and re-settlement are onerous processes which may increase the vulnerability of already vulnerable populations, especially girls and women. In such cases, new forms of servitude strongly overlap with the legacies of historical slavery. These displaced populations often live in precarious conditions because of marginalization and stigmatization in

new host communities. This precarity is amplified by the politics of land access as managed by local elite groups, but also the degradation of land in the fragile ecological Sahel zone particularly affected by climate change.

Our research on Slavery and Forced Migration (SlaFMig) in the Kayes region will analyze and map the history of slavery-related protracted displacements as strategies of resistance. We propose concrete measures to redress this long-term crisis by training legal professionals and advocating for the passage of a law that criminalizes descent-based slavery, as well as informing local and national government how to efficiently manage protracted displacements of people with ascribed “slave status.” We also campaign for more education aimed at the younger generation on the history of and resistance to slavery in Mali. Finally, the project aims at supporting displaced communities to achieve sustainable living by identifying their specific needs and helping them to access aid for microcredit projects.

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