Religious leaders occupy pivotal and public roles in shaping Mauritania’s economic and political development. In a country where religious and national identity are closely aligned, faith actors are well placed to wield their influence and engage with sensitive social and cultural issues such as child marriage and family planning, yet their various contributions are often poorly understood. This brief offers an overview of education, gender, and health in Mauritania and highlights relevant faith-linked development efforts.

Slow economic growth, stark social inequalities, and the increasingly pronounced impact of climate change have contributed to poor performance across numerous development indicators. Access to quality education, women’s social and economic equality, maternal health, and family planning are major issues. Mauritania’s geographical location places it at the center of security concerns in the region.

Since Mauritania gained independence from France in 1960, authoritarian leaders have dominated positions of power in the country. Moktar Ould Daddah, the country’s first president, established a one-party state and wielded power for nearly 20 years before he was deposed in a military coup in 1978. After close to three decades of military rule, democratic elections were held in 2007, but the president thus elected was ousted by the military the following year. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz then became president. His 10 years in office were marked by increased economic growth and political stability even as he faced criticism for cracking down on political opposition. Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, a close ally of Ould Abdel Aziz, was elected president in 2019; his inauguration was the first ever democratic transfer of power in Mauritania.

Mauritania is divided into 12 regions and the capital district of Nouakchott. The Sahara Desert covers the northern two-thirds of the country, which are sparsely populated and difficult to control politically. Today, slightly over half the population lives in urban areas along the coast and the southern border with Senegal and Mali. Decades of intermittent, severe droughts and unsustainable agricultural practices have led to the southern expansion of the Sahara, putting the country’s already small agricultural sector under additional strain. Vast reserves of ore, copper, gypsum, and other precious metals drive Mauritania’s large mining industry.
Religion and Development in Mauritania

Mauritania’s Religious Landscape

Despite its designation as an “Islamic Republic,” Mauritania is not a theocratic state; rather, governance structures combine an Islamic legal framework with a democratic system. The Constitution names Islam the official religion of the state, and all Mauritanian nationals are considered Muslim. Less than 1 percent of the population is Christian, almost all of whom are non-citizens. There is also a small Baha’i community numbering in the hundreds.

Islam in Mauritania

Arab merchants first brought Islam to Mauritania in the tenth century, after which the religion spread to the local Berber and Black African populations. Today, the majority of Mauritania’s Muslims are Sunni and follow the Maliki school of jurisprudence. As in other parts of West Africa, many Muslims are members of Sufi orders, or confrénries; the largest of which are the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya. Mauritania is known for its longstanding tradition of Islamic scholarship, making it an attractive political partner to the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. Unofficial estimates indicate that around 1 percent of Mauritanians are Shia Muslims.

Since the 1970s, Islamist-linked groups have gained a foothold in Mauritania, particularly among young bidan men in urban areas. Mauritanian students returning from Cairo and Tunis, inspired by Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, were among the first to establish such groups. The Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, have also played a significant role in spreading Islamism through student exchanges; by the early 2000s, the Saudi government had awarded hundreds of scholarships to Mauritians to attend the Islamic University of Medina, which trains students in Salafist theology. In addition, Saudi Arabia has financed the construction of dozens of Islamic schools and mosques in Mauritania, most notably Nouakchott’s...
Islamists in Mauritania share a common commitment to elevating the role of Islam in political and public life, such as by establishing a legal system based solely on sharia law and promoting foreign policy that favors other Muslim-majority states over Western nations. Islamists vary in their approach to achieving these ends, however. Some support democracy, seek influence through elected office, and renounce violent methods to gain political power, while others, known as jihadis, advocate the use of violence and the overthrow of democratic structures. Salafism, an Islamist movement linked to the Saudi Wahhabi movement, strives to model contemporary society off the first Muslim community of Medina. Some Mauritanian Salafists participate in mainstream politics, while others support violent measures against the government. (For more detail on Islamist groups and religious militancy, see the box, “Jihadism in Mauritania.”)

largest mosque, commonly referred to as the “Saudi Mosque.”

Mauritania’s Islamist movement continued to grow throughout the 1990s and 2000s, fueled by rising socioeconomic inequality, declining democratic institutions, and a series of policy decisions that alienated mainstream Muslims. Many Mauritians felt that the government’s recognition of Israel in 1999 was a capitulation to Western pressure. Similarly, the decision to cooperate with U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 ignited intense criticism among citizens who saw it as yet another concession to the West. In both instances, Islamist groups drew on popular discontent to appeal to members of the religious mainstream. In addition, political liberalization in the 1990s enabled Islamists to expand their formal political presence, establishing the country’s first official Islamist political party, the National Rally for Reform and Development (widely known as Tewassoul).

Christianity in Mauritania
Mauritania has one of the smallest Christian populations in West Africa. Christian missionaries struggled to evangelize local populations long before the post-independence government declared Islam the state religion. Today, there are a mere 10,000 Christians in the country, the majority of whom are from neighboring countries or Europe. Around half are Catholic, while the rest belong to Protestant and independent churches. Christians live predominantly in urban areas, especially Nouakchott. While the national government permits registered churches to conduct services, Christians may not proselytize. Furthermore, Mauritanian nationals are barred from attending Christian gatherings.

Religion, Government, and Society

The Mauritanian government has a complicated and often shifting relationship with religious institutions. Following independence, political leaders declared an Islamic Republic in order to unite the country’s disparate regional, racial, and ethnic tribal groups under a shared religious identity. The Constitution of 1991 cites Islam as the sole source of Mauritanian law; in practice, however, the legal system draws on both

### TABLE 1: Mauritania’s Development Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Current Status (Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>4.4 million (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total area</td>
<td>1,030,700 sq. km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban population (percent of total)</td>
<td>53.7% (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population growth rate</td>
<td>2.78% (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital city population (Nouakchott)</td>
<td>1.2 million (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population aged 0–14 years</td>
<td>1.8 million (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNI per capita, Atlas method</td>
<td>1,190 (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP growth rate</td>
<td>3.6% (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP Human Development Index Rank</td>
<td>159 of 188 (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption Perceptions Index Rank</td>
<td>144 of 187 (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal remittances, received</td>
<td>$77 million (2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

French civil law and sharia, with the courts applying sharia mainly in cases of family law. Mauritanian has been a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) since its founding in 1969.

Religious matters are overseen by a number of government ministries, foremost of which is the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ministère de la Culture et de l’Orientation Islamique). The Islamic High Committee (Haut Comité Islamique), established in 1992, acts as a direct link between the president and religious leaders, while the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals (Haut Conseil de la Fatwa et des Recours Gracieux) advises policymakers on producing legislation in line with Islamic teaching. Faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) and other NGOs must register with the Ministry of the Interior.

The government actively promotes Islamic values through education and media. Public and private secondary schools are required to teach at least four hours of religious education per week, and state-owned and operated media channels broadcast television and radio specials on Islamic teachings. The state regulates religious education through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education (MAIEO, Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l’Enseignement Originel), which also enacts fatwas, organizes pilgrimages to Mecca, and monitors mosques for extremist activities and sermons.

### BOX 3: Jihadism and Security in Mauritania

Since the 1990s, several militant Islamist groups have gained a foothold in Niger. Chief among these is Boko Haram, based in northern Nigeria. Mauritania was the target of numerous jihadi attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the early 2000s. In June 2005, members of AQIM’s predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), attacked the Lemghety military barracks in northeastern Mauritania, killing 17 soldiers. Subsequent years saw several more prominent attacks, including the murder of four French tourists and three Mauritanian soldiers in two separate incidences in December 2007.

While AQIM continued to attack neighboring countries in the 2010s, Mauritania was spared similarly violent incidents for reasons that remain unclear. A document recovered at Osama bin Laden’s compound during the 2011 raid by U.S. military suggested that Al-Qaeda had agreed to cease attacks in exchange for financial support from the Mauritanian government and the release of AQIM militants; however, any such arrangement has been strongly denied by the Mauritanian government and individuals close to Al-Qaeda. In a May 2018 communiqué, AQIM named Western companies in Mauritania as permissible targets for jihadi attacks, signaling the likely end to a period of relative tranquility in Mauritania.

While there has yet to be a resurgence of jihadi violence on Mauritanian soil, the country remains fertile ground for Al-Qaeda’s recruitment and training operations, producing more high-profile jihadi operatives per capita than any other country in the Sahel. Low levels of media censorship enable jihadi groups to broadcast messages and propaganda material with relative ease, drawing recruits from among disaffected Mauritanian youth. Most of these recruits are bidan, although some experts fear that escalating racial tensions and economic disparities in the country may push more haratin toward jihadism.

The Mauritanian government has developed a multipronged approach to respond to the threat posed by AQIM. In 2018, the MAEIO collaborated with Islamic civil society organizations to lead a series of workshops against religious radicalization and terrorism in all 15 regions of the country. The Ministry has also worked with religious leaders to deradicalize imprisoned AQIM fighters and help them reintegrate into Mauritanian society.

Mauritania is a member of the G5 Sahel, along with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger. Since 2014, G5 Sahel has coordinated joint efforts development and security matters in the Sahel.
A Pew- Templeton review underscores the high level of government restrictions on religion in Mauritania. These include harsh penalties for speech deemed critical of Islam. In 2014, the Mauritanian blogger Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death for posting statements on social media that disparaged the Prophet Muhammad and denounced slavery and social caste. Mkhaitir’s sentence was subsequently commuted to two years’ imprisonment, but Mauritania’s National Assembly passed a law in 2018 that mandated the death penalty for “blasphemous” and “sacrilegious” acts. A 2017 law imposed a penalty of one to five years imprisonment for criticizing the dominant Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Government regulations shape many aspects of religious expression in Mauritania, particularly among religious minorities. All non-Muslim religious gatherings must receive approval by the Ministry of the Interior, including those held in private homes, and Mauritanian citizens may not attend these services. Although the possession of non-Islamic religious materials is not illegal, there is a ban on printing and distributing such materials. The government has also taken steps to regulate and restrict Mauritania’s small Shia Muslim minority, closing a prominent Shia religious center in Nouakchott in May 2018.

Since the 1990s, Mauritanian authorities have taken numerous measures to curb the Islamist influence in Mauritania, from passing laws aimed at curbing extremist speech to authorizing the arrests of prominent Islamist clerics. In May 2003, authorities arrested around a dozen Islamist leaders and preachers in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou on the suspicion of radicalizing and recruiting Muslim youth for international jihadi organizations. A July 2003 law tightened regulations on the content of sermons, and in June 2015, the government announced a salary cut for more than 100 imams who promoted Salafism and Wahhabism. State authorities have also closed down religious training centers and schools with ties to Tewassoul and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Education

Chronic underfunding, high dropout rates, and poor academic results place Mauritania’s schools near the bottom of global education rankings. In 2017, Mauritania ranked 128th of 137 countries on the “health and primary education” category of the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index. Within this category, it ranked last for quality of the education system and extent of staff training.

While enrollment rates have steadily risen across all levels of education, a significant share of Mauritanian children still do not attend school. In 2018, primary gross enrollment was near 100 percent, but net enrollment was 80 percent, meaning that a fifth of primary-age children were out of school. (The disparity between primary gross and net enrollment is due in large part to the fact that many secondary-age children are still in primary school.) A full third of students drop out before completing school, and only 35 percent go on to secondary school. Information about the number of children attending pre-primary schools is scarce, but one 2015 estimate put the number at a mere 30,000.

Enrollment and retention of students does not necessarily translate to academic success. In 2016, only 29 percent of lower secondary students and 15 percent of upper secondary students passed their culminating exams. Inadequate teacher training is a major factor behind this trend. A 2017 study found that the average grade 4 teacher lacked the knowledge to be considered qualified to teach French, Math, and Pedagogy. Large class sizes are another likely cause of low student performance; with close to 50 students in a single classroom, teachers struggle to monitor and support each individual students’ progress.

Poor management of the education system poses a significant obstacle for many children wishing to attend school. Children in rural areas must walk many miles to...
reach the nearest school; more than a fifth of children who dropped out of primary school cited distance from the nearest facility as the main reason behind the decision. Yet in the 2016/2017 school year, one in ten primary schools lay empty because of a lack of government funding and teaching staff. A majority of operational schools are considered “incomplete,” with only 35 percent of primary schools offering all six grade levels. Furthermore, chronic underfunding frequently leaves schools without proper teaching equipment and materials; a 2018 World Bank survey found that only 12 percent of Mauritanian students had textbooks. Additionally, only 1 in 20 public primary schools had clean and accessible latrines, which deters many adolescent girls from attending.

Previous reform efforts have been mostly counterproductive in improving the reach and quality of public education in Mauritania. A structural overhaul of the education system introduced in 1999 mandated bilingual (French and Arabic) education in all public schools but proved ineffective because the majority of teachers were not trained to teach in French. In 2011, the government launched a new education sector development plan for 2011–2020; the plan aims to achieve universal primary education by 2020, increase access to preprimary and secondary school, promote enrollment and retention of out-of-school children, improve school curricula to align with the needs of the labor market, and strengthen technical and vocational training. In 2014, 14 percent of the government budget went towards education, almost half of which went toward primary education.

Private schools have emerged to offer an alternative to public education for some Mauritanian families. Private school enrollment went up by 61 percent between 2010 and 2014, compared to a 5 percent decrease in public school enrollment. In the 2016/2017 school year, private schools accounted for a fifth of all schools in the country (not including religious schools). Private schools remain a largely urban phenomenon, with more than 80 percent of private primary school enrollment at schools in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

Islamic schools, known as mahadras, provide an alternative to formal public or private institutions for many Mauritanians. These schools cater to students of all ages, from children as young as 6 to those in their twenties. Although curricula vary by school—from focusing exclusively on Qur’anic recitation to including courses on Islamic history, law, and literature—the majority of mahadras eschew formal education in subjects such as science and mathematics. While the MAEIO officially oversees mahadras, these schools are not required to report to the ministry, and they do not receive government funding.

BOX 4: Civil Registration as an Obstacle to Public Education

Civil registration measures introduced in 2011 have denied thousands of Mauritanian children access to public education. The biometric registration process requires that citizens and non-citizens register with the government in order to obtain social services, including the ability to enroll in public schools; to register their child, parents must produce a birth certificate, copies of their national identity cards, and a copy of their marriage certificate. Many families are unable to register because they are missing documents, live far from the nearest registration center, or lack the time to file an application. According to UNICEF estimates, a third of children under age 5 were not registered, including 60 percent of children from the poorest households. While some families have managed to enroll unregistered children by appealing directly to school administrators, these children cannot take mandatory national exams in order to graduate. Faced with few options, many parents of unregistered children opt to send their children to Islamic schools instead.

In 2010, there were over 9,000 mahadras in Mauritania, with 170,000 enrolled students, 30 percent of whom were female. Close to half of these students attend a formal school (whether public or private) in addition to a mahadra.36 Those who exclusively attend mahadras typically do so because they cannot afford formal schooling. Since mahadras do not follow the national curriculum, their diplomas are not recognized by state authorities, and many graduates struggle to find work in a competitive job market.37 A pilot project launched by the MAEIO to improve educational outcomes at mahadras introduced science and math curricula at 23 mahadras and trained 200 teachers in the relevant curricula. At its close, the project was widely considered a success, suggesting the possibility for future collaborations between mahadras and public institutions.38

Gender Equality

Women face numerous obstacles to full legal and economic rights in Mauritania. In 2018, the country ranked 136th of 149 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index, which measures women’s access to education, health services, economic opportunities, and political representation.59 A mere 45 percent of Mauritian women are literate, compared to 64 percent of men, and the average Mauritanian woman is in school for just 2.7 years.40 Child marriage, gender-based violence (GBV), and female genital mutilation (FGC) are topics of particular concern, as is gender bias in Mauritanian laws. While gender-based discrimination affects all classes and ethnic groups, haratin and Black African women are disproportionately affected.41

While Mauritania is a signatory on numerous international treaties for gender equality, local laws treat men and women differently in matters of divorce, child custody, marriage, and inheritance.42 Under the 2001 Personal Status Code, it is easier for men to obtain a divorce than for women, and divorced women risk losing their property and custody of their children. Furthermore, women are unable to transfer their nationality to their children except in special circumstances.

Mauritanian women make up just over a quarter of the national labor force, where they earn less than men and have fewer opportunities to advance their financial interests. In 2018, the gross national income per capita for women was $2,018 (2011 PPP $), compared to $5,462 among men. Gender-based restrictions on inheriting and owning land pose another obstacle to accumulating wealth. A 2015 World Bank study found that women held less than eight percent of Mauritania’s 27,000 title deeds.43 Furthermore, only 16 percent of women had an account with a bank or mobile money service provider.

Child marriage is a persistent barrier to women’s legal, economic, and educational empowerment. Over a third of Mauritanian girls are married by age 18, and eighteen percent by age 15, with the average age of first marriage just over 17 years. While a 2001 law sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18, it allows legal guardians to marry off younger girls under particular circumstances. Child marriage is more common in rural areas (55 percent) and among girls from the poorest households, who are twice as likely to be child brides than girls from the wealthiest households. Education is likewise linked to a girls’ chances of marrying early: 43 percent of Mauritanian girls with no educational attainment were married as children, compared to only 22 percent of those who had completed secondary education or higher.45 For girls who are still in school, early marriage frequently leads them to drop out, which perpetuates low educational outcomes among child brides.46

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major concern in Mauritania. While official statistics on GBV are not publicly available, local NGOs report that the issue is widespread and underreported. The Association of Women Heads of Family (Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille), Mauritania’s premier women’s rights NGO, intervened in 428 cases of rape, 128 cases of child marriage, and more than 1,600 instances of domestic conflict in Mauritania.

Box 5: Force-Feeding among Mauritanian Girls

In a society in which a heavy figure is associated with beauty, wealth, and wellbeing, many young girls are force-fed high-caloric diets in order to improve their marriage prospects. This practice, known as leblouh (gavage in French), is frequently overseen by girls’ mothers and other female relatives. While force-feeding is declining in urban areas, some women are turning to dangerous alternative methods of weight gain, including growth hormones meant for livestock.4 The use of such drugs has led to serious injury and death in some cases.

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FGC in Mauritania

Slavery and human trafficking affect thousands of Mauritanian women and girls, most of whom are haratin. Many are forced into domestic servitude from a young age, where they are vulnerable to sexual violence. There have also been incidents of women and girls signing up for nursing and teaching positions in the Gulf States only to be forced into domestic and sexual slavery upon arrival.

In recent years, the Mauritanian government has taken steps to address FGC. A national strategy for combatting FGC was released in 2015, and the issue is included in the country’s Strategy on Accelerated Growth and Prosperity (2016–2030). FGC was officially criminalized in a 2017 reproductive health law. Around the same time, Islamic scholars released a fatwa against the practice, declaring that it lacked basis in religious teaching. It has not been put forth as a legislative bill, which is supported by numerous women’s rights organizations. A bill drafted in 2016 would strengthen punishments for rape, establish courts to deal specifically with GBV cases, and permit NGOs to bring GBV cases to the courts. Yet the bill, which is supported by numerous women’s rights groups, has thus far been rejected by parliament on the grounds of being anti-Islamic. It has not been put forth for another vote at the time of writing.

For those women who do report GBV, ineffective reporting mechanisms, social taboos around sex, and laws that legally disadvantage women can prevent them from bringing their perpetrators to justice. Women wishing to pursue legal action must first report their case to the police in order to receive a referral for medical examination. The reporting process does not ensure the privacy of the individual making the complaint. Furthermore, there is no standard police protocol for sexual violence cases, which leaves much to the discretion of individual police departments. Numerous rape survivors have reported being dismissed by police officers and told that they were responsible for being raped. Moreover, health professionals sometimes refuse to conduct medical examinations out of fear of retaliation by perpetrators.

The government has taken steps in the past five years to curb the number of incidents of GBV and assist survivors. The country’s first-ever sexual violence unit opened in a public hospital in 2017; it offers medical consultations, emergency interventions, and free STI screenings and counseling services for women. A bill drafted in 2016 would strengthen punishments for rape, establish courts to deal specifically with GBV cases, and permit NGOs to bring GBV cases to the courts. Yet the bill, which is supported by numerous women’s rights groups, has thus been rejected by parliament on the grounds of being anti-Islamic. It has not been put forth for another vote at the time of writing.
Religion and Development in Mauritania

Mauritanian religious leaders’ engagement on the issues of child marriage, GBV, and FGC reflect their ability to address socially sensitive issues in ways that respect Mauritanian culture. Over 200 Mauritanian religious and community leaders have highlighted Islamic teachings that oppose child marriage in their communities as part of the Sahel Women’s Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD), a project supported by the World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Imams have led training sessions on women’s empowerment for over 370,000 Mauritanians in rural areas and participated in radio broadcasts that promote women’s social empowerment. Islamic scholars have also participated in UNFPA-led educational sessions on child marriage, GBV, and FGC.

Health

Life expectancy in Mauritania rose by 20 years between 1960 and 2018, yet the current average lifespan of 64.5 years still falls far below global averages. Infectious diseases account for over a third of deaths, and birth-related complications account for another 13 percent. The health sector lacks the funding, infrastructure, and human resources to address the everyday needs of Mauritanians, and there has been a notable lack of government-led public health campaigns focused on disease prevention and healthy living.

Infectious diseases pose a significant health threat. In 2018, there were around 2,400 new and relapsed cases of tuberculosis, a fifth of which were fatal. HIV/AIDS infections are on the decline, dropping from less than 1,000 new infections in 2005 to less than 200 in 2018. An estimated 5,600 people were living with HIV in 2018, more than half of whom were on antiretroviral therapy. There are an estimated 8,200 orphans (aged 0–17) due to HIV/AIDS in Mauritania. Two-thirds of the Mauritanian population lives in high malaria transmission areas in the south of the country. In 2017, there were over 20,000 confirmed cases of malaria and 67 deaths, but the WHO estimates that the real number is much higher, at more than 238,000 cases and 1,500 deaths.

Poor water, sanitation, and hygiene systems contribute to the spread of diarrheal diseases and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). In 2019, under half of Mauritanians lived with basic hygiene and sanitation services,
while nearly a third still lived in areas where open defecation is commonplace. Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases reported infections of 850,000 people in 2017 (600,000 cases of bilharzia and 340,000 cases of blinding trachoma), of which under a third received the necessary treatment.\textsuperscript{50}

Mauritania’s health care system is ill-equipped to address these and other health challenges. The country’s hospitals and health centers are heavily concentrated in urban areas, and more than two thirds of the population lives more than an hour away from a functioning health facility. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualified medical personnel across the country, with approximately one nurse or midwife for 1,500 people and one physician for every 8,300. Outdated and dysfunctional equipment poses an additional obstacle to effective medical treatment, as do frequent shortages in medical supplies. A 2016 survey of Mauritanian health facilities found that the average facility only stocked 4 out of 13 essential medicines at any given time, and no facility stocked all 13. The survey also found that slightly less than half of facilities had basic medical equipment.\textsuperscript{61} Furthermore, the health care system lacks a centralized system for maintaining patient records and coordinating care among primary, secondary, and tertiary facilities.\textsuperscript{62}

In order to address these challenges, the government launched the National Health Development Plan (PNDS) for 2012–2020, which focuses on improving access to care, training community health workers, and reforming pharmaceutical care and the hospital system. However, progress toward achieving the PNDS goals has been mixed, largely due to insufficient funding. Only 6 percent of the national budget goes toward the health sector, far below the 15 percent benchmark set by the Abuja Declaration. The vast majority of health funding goes toward running hospitals, with only around 21 percent of funds allocated to primary care and a mere 4 percent to preventative efforts such as immunization and family planning.\textsuperscript{63} State funding is insufficient in covering the health care costs of citizens: of the average USD $56 spent per person on health finances in 2016, only $20 came from government sources. The average Mauritanian
Despite strides in maternal and child health outcomes in the past decade, there remains significant room for improvement. While maternal mortality has steadily dropped in sub-Saharan Africa since the 2000s, the rate has remained relatively stable in Mauritania. In 2018, 766 out of 100,000 live births resulted in the death of the mother, the seventh highest maternal mortality rate in the world. One factor behind this trend is the lack of qualified personnel to assist with birth-related complications; in 2015, nearly a third of women did not give birth in the presence of a skilled birth attendant. Common causes of maternal death include hemorrhaging, hypertension, and sepsis, which are all preventable if given proper medical attention.

Newborns, infants, and young children are also vulnerable to health complications. In 2018, 76 out of 1,000 children under the age of 5 died, nearly half of whom died during the neonatal phase (birth to one month). Pneumonia and diarrhea were among the top causes of death of children under 5. Food insecurity has also had a particularly heavy impact on young children: over 30 percent experience moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), and 20 percent suffer from chronic malnutrition. In 2015, 15 percent were wasted (low weight for height) and 28 percent were stunted (low height for age).

In recent years, family planning has gained recognition as a major public health concern. With 40 percent of the population under the age of 15, a predicted population surge to 6 million by 2050, and consistently poor maternal health outcomes, the government and civil society officials are promoting family planning methods for the purpose of spacing births. A landmark 2017 law declared reproductive health a universal human right and a decree the following year authorized health practitioners to distribute modern family planning methods. Since then, the Mauritanian government has included family planning as a priority in its National Health Development Plan. Mauritania is part of the Ouagadougou Partnership that aims to increase access to modern family planning.

Despite policy changes, many Mauritanian women still lack access to modern contraceptive methods (MCM), with close to a third of married women expressing an unmet need for family planning. Nearly 10 percent of women use MCM (compared to 14 percent of married women). Poor women are disproportionately affected, with only 9 percent of women in the lowest wealth quintile saying their need for family planning is satisfied, compared to 46 in the wealthiest quintile. Low usage rates are driven by a variety of factors, including women’s lack of access to health facilities, shortages of MCM at facilities, widespread misinformation about the health risks of family planning, and certain religious voices that oppose all forms of contraception, even for the purpose of spacing births.

Muslim leaders are widely recognized as stakeholders in policy discussions around reproductive health and family planning in Mauritania; government officials and civil society representatives consider religious support a necessary step toward the acceptance of modern contraceptive methods by everyday Mauritanians. Several high-profile imams joined civil society leaders, medical experts, and government officials in drafting the 2017 reproductive health law. Local NGOs have also worked with religious leaders to spread awareness and dispel misconceptions around contraception; El Hanane, a Nouakchott-based NGO, works with religious and civil society leaders to provide Mauritians with information about birth spacing in accordance with Islamic teaching.
Looking Ahead

Religion touches upon almost every aspect of Mauritanian life, and Muslim leaders are in a strategic position to help shape policy discussions and individuals’ behavior around education, gender issues, and health. Religious groups run Islamic schools, help set policy agendas, and work with community members to shape local attitudes around sensitive topics such as gender-based violence and family planning. However, these contributions sometimes go unacknowledged in official development discussions. This brief has highlighted development in Mauritania in the fields of education, gender, and health, focusing on applicable faith-linked contributions. The key findings included below are designed to initiate further discussion and research into these topics.

Government officials and mainstream Muslim leaders have a history of working together closely to oversee religious speech and counter extremist ideology in Mauritania, but the growing presence of Islamist groups is reshaping the nature of these relationships. Public opinion about who speaks for Mauritania’s Muslims has begun to shift as Islamists expand both their religious following and political base in the country. Growing concerns about religious extremism and violence in the region have further influenced the relationships among religious communities and with the government. Government restrictions on religious speech and crackdowns on Islamist mosques and schools have done little to diminish popular support for Islamists, especially as many mainstream Muslims become increasingly critical of foreign policy decisions deemed favorable to Western nations. Since legalizing the country’s first Islamist political party in 2007, the government has included Islamist political leaders in policy discussions about preventing jihadi violence and radicalization in the country.

Women face numerous obstacles to full legal, economic, and social equality in Mauritania, where gender-based violence, female genital cutting, and child marriage are widespread. Survivors of sexual assault have few options for legal recourse in a legal system where rape victims can be prosecuted for adultery. Taboos around sex further deter women and girls from speaking out about sexual violence and harassment, and a legal loophole enables parents to marry off their daughters before age 18. The government has yet to pass legislation to discourage these practices and reform the existing laws governing them. While some Muslim leaders have spoken out against child marriage and gender-based violence, there have been no efforts to try to address these issues on a systemic level.

Maternal health and family planning are at the forefront of Mauritania’s public health agenda; government officials, civil society representatives, and religious leaders are working together to address the multi-faceted nature of these issues. Mauritania has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world, with one in every 766 out of 100,000 live births resulting in the death of the mother. A lack of medical facilities and trained personnel, as well as high child marriage rates and lack of family planning, contribute to these outcomes. Family planning is of particular concern, with a third of married women expressing an unmet need modern contraceptive methods. The government has named access to contraception a policy priority and has partnered with religious leaders to shape public opinion on the matter. While their impact has been gradual, numerous imams have publicly endorsed family planning as a religiously permissible means of birth spacing.

In a country with some of the world’s worst public education scores, religious schools provide an alternative to conventional education, but they remain largely disconnected from the broader education system. More than 9,000 religious schools, known as mahadras, are an alternative to students without access to a public or private school, as well as a supplement to students who attend these conventional schools. However, students attending mahadras do not graduate with state-recognized degrees, and they frequently lack the skills to compete in the job market. One recent government initiative introduced science and math curricula in two dozen mahadras and was met with initial success, pointing to a potential path for bridging the divide between religious and public schools and improving Mauritania’s education rankings.
Endnotes


24. “Mauritania closes ‘extremist’ Islamic school.” Qantara.de, September 26, 2018. Available at: https://en.qantara.de/content/mauritania-closes-extremist-islamic-school


RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT IN MAURITANIA


World Faiths Development Dialogue
3307 M Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20007
T 202.687.6444 | E info@wfdd.us | www.wfdd.us
berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue among religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

This brief, authored by Luisa Banchoff, is a continuation of WFDD’s country mapping work. Additional information and publications can be found at https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/mapping-of-faith-inspired-organizations-by-world-region-and-country. Address questions to WFDD (info@wfdd.us).