

## **Historic Testimony by Enslaved Ethiopian Migrant Worker Exposes Abuse in Lebanon's Kafala System**

**27 May 2025**

Today, Meseret Hailu, an Ethiopian migrant worker enslaved and abused in Lebanon's Kafala system for over eight years, testified for the first time before an Investigative Judge at Baabda Palace in Beirut. This follows her groundbreaking 2020 complaint, the first ever in Lebanon to allege slavery and slave trading against her former employer and recruitment agency. Her testimony marks a historic moment for victims of slavery, amplifying the voices of countless others silenced by abuse rampant in the Kafala System not only in Lebanon but across the region.

*I'm here today not just to tell my story, but to speak the truth about what was done to me and to stand up for every migrant worker in Lebanon who has been silenced or abused," said Meseret. "What I went through still haunts me. It's not easy to move on, to work, to live, after such trauma. But being able to speak my truth in front of a judge is a powerful step. I hope it becomes a turning point, not just for me, but for all migrant workers who deserve justice, dignity, and a voice.*

Meseret's journey to this moment has been fraught with challenges. Traveling from rural Ethiopia, she left behind her ill mother and a young daughter, facing countless obstacles to testify at this critical hearing. *"MH has shown extraordinary courage today. By confronting her enslaver and sharing her story in court, she broke through years of silence, fear, and systemic oppression,"* said Antonia Mulvey, Executive Director of Legal Action Worldwide (LAW). *"Her voice is a rallying cry for justice. One that exposes the brutal realities of the Kafala system and demands accountability. LAW stands with her, and we will not stop until justice is done. Not just for MH, but for every woman silenced by this system."*

Meseret's testimony follows a year-long legal battle to ensure her voice was heard. After numerous rejections of Meseret's requests for remote hearings and hearing date changes, the investigation into her allegations was closed in July 2024. However, the case was reopened in March 2025 following a recommendation by the Public Prosecutor.

Meseret's ordeal began in 2011 when she sought work in Lebanon to support her family. Her employer seized her passport upon her arrival as well as reduced her pay. Her employer proceeded to subject Meseret to verbal and physical abuse, restricting her freedom, access to food, and communication with her family. For nearly seven years, she endured this abuse without pay until LAW intervened.

The investigation continues, with Meseret demanding the prosecution of her employer and recruiter. LAW remains committed to supporting her as she seeks justice.

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*Notes to editors:*

Recent estimates establish that there are approximately 250,000 migrant workers in Lebanon today. A large majority are women and 70% come from Africa and Asia, in particular Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. They come to Lebanon under the Kafala system, a migration sponsorship scheme that gives citizens and companies in the country almost total control over migrant domestic workers' employment and migration status. Human rights organisations have long described the Kafala system as slavery. See LAW's website for more information – [www.legalactionworldwide.org](http://www.legalactionworldwide.org)

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*About LAW:*

LAW is an independent, non-profit organisation of human rights lawyers and jurists working in fragile and conflict-affected areas. LAW provides legal aid to victims and communities that have suffered human rights violations and abuses in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.