

## Press Release

### In remarkable turnaround, judge gives migrant worker the opportunity to present her case in landmark slavery case in Lebanon

Beirut, 11 March 2025

An Ethiopian migrant worker enslaved by her Lebanese employer was granted the right on Tuesday to testify against her abuser, a stunning reversal in criminal proceedings that initially seemed poised to move forward without the victim's input.

On 10 March, an investigating judge upheld a victim's right to be heard in a landmark slavery case exposing the abuses of Lebanon's migrant domestic worker system, or "kafala" system. The judge had previously refused to allow the victim, "MH," to participate in the pre-trial investigation, denying requests for a remote hearing and declining to postpone the hearing until MH could travel to Lebanon from Ethiopia to present her evidence.

Now, in a remarkable turnaround, the judge has rescheduled the hearing for 20 May 2025, allowing MH to attend in person and provide evidence against her abuser. The decision followed a recommendation from the Public Prosecutor, who reviewed the case file and advised that the judge needed to hear from the victim. The judge also ordered the defendant to prove that MH's wages were paid, similarly on the recommendation of the Public Prosecutor. This change in course is a victory for access to justice and equal application of the law in Lebanon.

This is the first criminal case alleging slavery and slave trading brought by a migrant domestic worker against a Lebanese employer and recruiting agency. Although other cases have similarly alleged forced labour, delayed pay, and maltreatment, this is the first case in Lebanon and the wider region to argue that these conditions constitute slavery. The case also alleges that the actions taken against MH by her employer and the agent who brought her to Lebanon amount to slave trading, citing violations of domestic criminal law and international human rights law. The original criminal complaint was filed on MH's behalf on 8 October 2020.

Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), the organization representing MH, in March 2024 asked the investigating judge to question MH via a remote hearing. Ethiopian nationals like MH cannot obtain visas easily, and MH feared retaliation for speaking out. Alternatively, LAW asked to postpone the in-person hearing to give MH time to obtain a passport and visa so she could travel back to Lebanon. When those requests were denied, MH faced the prospect that the investigating judge would decide whether her case could proceed to full trial without ever hearing from her. LAW immediately appealed the decision.

LAW will now fully support MH as she prepares to return to the country where she was enslaved and abused by helping her obtain the documentation required and taking every available measure to ensure that her safety is not at risk. In addition to fulfilling her wish to testify, MH's appearance is important under the principle of equal and effective access to justice. These pre-trial proceedings will determine whether the charges against MH's abuser are confirmed. That is why LAW has done

everything possible to secure her attendance.

“This unexpected decision from the judge in Baabda Palace demonstrates that fairness and due process can be secured in Lebanon as long as you are willing to fight,” said Antonia Mulvey, Executive Director of LAW. “MH has suffered setback after setback in this case, which has been making its way through the courts for four years. Despite this, she has never been daunted in her struggle to obtain justice and accountability and protect others from the same abuses she experienced. She has always been willing to face her abuser and tell her side of the story. The judge has vindicated the rights of all victims by giving MH that opportunity.”

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*Notes to editors:*

According to an assessment by the International Organisation for Migration, there are approximately 400,000 migrant workers in Lebanon. 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 MDWs employment and migration status. Human rights organisations have long described the kafala system as a form of legalised slavery.

*For media interviews and requests, please contact [groh@legalactionworldwide.org](mailto:groh@legalactionworldwide.org)*

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.

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