

**Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination:  
Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic**

**Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery  
2 December 2020, 12:00 – 13:30**

**Statement: Ms Tsigereda Brihanu (former domestic worker, co-founder and project manager of Egna Legna)**

*[Moderator: From your experience, what is the role of racial discrimination and the impact of COVID-19 on migrant domestic workers in Lebanon? What strategies have you and others who have suffered from this practice adopted to respond?]*

Hello, my name is Tsigereda and I am Ethiopian migrant worker and activist and I have been working in Lebanon for almost 7 years. I am the co-founder and the Projects Manager at Egna Legna, a community-based, feminist activist organization working on migrant domestic workers' issues and general women's issues in Lebanon and Ethiopia.

As a former domestic worker myself, I have seen what it is to be under the sponsorship system and I keep seeing it every day. Employers literally control our freedom. Many of them are abusive with no one holding them accountable. Many of them pay very little, not even minimum wage, they pay for example 150\$ for Ethiopian workers. They don't pay our salaries on time and sometimes they don't pay us at all. We do not have the freedom or choice to quit or change our jobs. So you can tell that the situation under the sponsorship system is already very bad to the extent that 2 domestic workers commit suicide every week in Lebanon.

Then the economic crisis hit, then the corona pandemic as well and things became so much worse. Many domestic workers lost their jobs. Many of those who did not live with employers, lost their houses because they cannot pay rent. They can't even afford food. Single mothers are no longer able to afford basic needs for their children. Live-in domestic workers were thrown by their employers in front of embassies. Those who are still in the houses are still abused with zero protections, they are overworked, and they are not getting paid.

So a lot of domestic workers want to go back home but they can't afford tickets. They can't afford PCR tests. They can't pay the penalty fees for the Lebanese government. The penalty fees are fees you pay when you have expired documents or have entered illegally to the country. Also many single mothers don't have the needed papers for their children. And many of the workers have months of unpaid wages.

In response to all of this, as Egna Legna organization, we started fundraising to support these women, from all nationalities, to go back home. We also help them to get the medical support they need, here or in their home country. We were able to repatriate so far more than 300 women and we are still fundraising to support more. We also do food distribution and baby supplies for hundreds of women and single mothers, also from all nationalities. We follow up with the women to secure the needed travel papers for their children as well.

Egna legna started 3 years ago because we saw the need for us to organize, to support our sisters in Lebanon, to advocate for the abolition of the sponsorship system, which leads to this abuse, and to raise awareness in Ethiopia to stop women from coming here.

The roots of our group were at the Anti-Racism Movement – migrant community center, a Lebanese civil society organization receiving support from the UN Slavery Fund. At the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) Center, I met several Ethiopian members in 2017 and we decided to do something, to offer support instead of just receiving it.

Initially we started with basic support for women in shelters and for single mothers. ARM offered us the space for meetings and activities and shared their experiences with us. Later on, ARM organized an info session on a feminist funding opportunity, so we attended and decided to apply for funding to develop our work scope. We were selected among hundreds of applications and we were offered hence several intensive training and workshops. We were able to launch awareness videos targeting domestic workers in Lebanon and Ethiopia, on sexual health, legal rights, financing, transportation and others... We also organized skills learning workshops for tens of women around Lebanon to help them become financially independent when they go back home. We continued to develop our casework as well and now we collaborate with different NGOs and legal firms for cases of abuse and labor violations. And with the Corona pandemic and economic crisis, we immediately started relief work and repatriation efforts.

Our organization, even though it started in Lebanon, is registered in Canada, because as domestic workers, we do not have the right to organize or unionize. But we are still working on the ground, we are visible in the media, we are doing our best every single day, and any support for our work and the work of other community groups and NGOs is much needed, now more than ever.