

# Abused Ethiopian domestic worker is “the poster girl for kafala” in Lebanon

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**No matter how many times one hears about the abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, the stories do not become any less shocking, as the harrowing case of Lensa Lelisa proves. This March, the 21-year-old Ethiopian domestic worker working in Beirut, Lebanon, made headlines after she jumped from a second-floor balcony at her employer’s house - the Lebanese fashion designer Eleanore Ajami. She was attempting to escape the violent abuse that she says that she and another Ethiopian colleague endured at the hands of Ajami and her three adult children : Alexis, Crystel and Joe Khalil.**

Lensa broke both her legs in the incident and injured her face. In a [video recorded from her hospital bed](#) by This is Lebanon, a group that shares stories of domestic worker abuses in the country, Lensa describes how “from the very beginning they were abusing me”. In the video she says : “They tortured me and I couldn’t do anything to save myself. They beat me every day with an electric cable and wrapped my hair around their hands and dragged me around the room. They smashed my head into the walls.”

Despite her harrowing testimony and the media attention this particular case received, a police investigation found the Ajami-Khalil family to be innocent. On 2 April, she was [paraded on national television](#) with Ajami’s daughter Crystel, while still in her hospital bed. During the interview, she recanted her story, saying instead that she had slipped from the balcony while hanging out her clothes.

Unbelievably, Lensa was returned to the Ajami-Khalil house, and while the family promised to release her on 13 May (they did not), there has been no news of either the fate of her colleague or Lensa since she was discharged from hospital.

“Lensa is the poster girl for the [kafala system](#) [the sponsorship system that legally binds foreign workers to their local employers]”, says Dipendra Uprety, the founder of This is Lebanon.

“Every institution has failed her, including Caritas [the international Catholic NGO which, in Lebanon, focuses specifically on migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees], the hospital, the forensic doctor, the Internal Security Forces, General Security [Lebanese Intelligence Agency] and even her own embassy,” he tells *Equal Times*.

“She was paraded on her hospital bed on live TV. How is that ethical ? Why wasn’t she moved to a safe house where she felt free from retaliation ? Why was she only interviewed under the watchful eye of her abuser ?” he says.

Bassam Khawaja, Lebanon researcher for Human Rights Watch (HRW), concurs. "Security agencies need to take into account the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers in these situations and ensure that workers alleging abuse can speak freely without fear of retaliation," he tells *Equal Times*. "That did not happen in this case."

This is Lebanon documents alleged cases of the abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Between 16-22 April, just over a month after Lensa's story broke, the NGO received over 40 requests for help or information, mostly over unpaid salaries.

By sharing the stories it receives on social media, the group has managed to secure the freedom of several women including [Halima Ubpah](#) from the Philippines, who had been working for one family with almost no pay in 10 years, and a Nepali domestic worker who had been in a similar situation for over two decades. "Social media works, but the Lebanese government should bring these women under the protection of the labour law," Uprety says.

### **No rights, no legal unions**

Lebanon's approximately 250,000 migrant domestic workers are currently excluded from the country's labour legislation. In addition, the government has not yet ratified Convention 189, the landmark International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on domestic workers. As a result, migrants domestic workers frequently fail to receive a minimum wage, sick days or holidays, and low wages, non-payment of wages, long work days, forced confinement, intimidation and harassment are frequently reported.

In 2015, the country's first union for migrant workers - the [Domestic Workers' Union of Lebanon](#) - was inaugurated as an affiliate of the Federation of Employees' and Workers' Trade Unions of Lebanon (FENASOL). However, the breakthrough was shortlived as the Ministry of Labor declared it illegal. Since then, the union has continued to organise and campaign for migrant workers' rights in Lebanon, but with only 700 members, its results have been limited.

"Lebanon excludes domestic workers from the labour law, and alongside Oman, it is one of just two major countries of destination in the Middle East that have not put in place legal protections for domestic workers," says Khawaja of HRW.

Research conducted by the international human rights NGO in 2008 found that [one migrant domestic worker was dying of unnatural causes](#) every week in a bid to escape their employers.

Grace, 32, is a Kenyan domestic worker who is trying to survive without work, money or the legal right to stay in Lebanon after she recently escaped years of abuse and forced labour. "My first employer was really bad," she says of the family she worked with when she first arrived in April 2015. "They wouldn't let me eat, especially the wife. I couldn't take it any more so I asked to be sent back to the office [the recruitment agency that treated her file]. They threatened to kill me but eventually brought me to the office."

She says that she initially refused to go with her second employer after he told her that he would only pay her US\$150 instead of US\$200 per month, but she says she had no other choice.

Grace worked for almost two years with this employer ; her experience was even worse than the first time. She was only fed one meal a day and worked without pay. Every month, she was beaten up on the day that she should have received her wages. "Sometimes, the family would leave me for the whole day locked inside the house without any food. I contacted my embassy but they didn't help."

With the advice of a friend, Grace fled to Caritas in the hope that they could help her return home, but she says that she was told there wasn't anything they could do. Instead, they called her employer to come and pick her up. "I said I couldn't work there anymore, so they advised me to ask my family for a ticket to go back home. I got it in three days but it's been a year since then and they [Grace's former employers] haven't given me back my passport."

Last May, Grace says she was abandoned by the family in a house where they previously lived, without any food or money, although another domestic worker helped with food from time to time. She was then sent to the home of one of her employer's relatives, where she says she was sexually harassed and beaten up by one of the sons, before being kicked out a few months ago.

Since then, Grace has been living as an undocumented migrant and she survives by doing odd jobs. When she asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help her go home, they told her to contact her former employers, which she is too afraid to do. Like so many other women, Grace came to Lebanon with dreams of helping her family back home. Now she is stuck in a nightmare because of the cruel indifference of the agencies and organisations that are meant to help her, and the Lebanese government's refusal to accept the basic rights of domestic workers.

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## **Florence Massena**

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