

“Strength in Struggle: Muluken Gebrewold’s Resilient Journey to Economic Independence”



Muluken Gebrewold is a 43-year-old Ethiopian woman, born and raised in Bedele city of Illubabor Z one. She is divorced and have a 26-year-old son. Muluken’s life took a drastic turn following the loss of her mother, the end of her marriage, and the dismissal from her job as a typewriter in a courthouse all at the same time, which pushed her to seek new opportunities in Addis Ababa. However, her situation still remained difficult in Addis Ababa after she started working as a cashier in a

restaurant, with her salary barely providing her basic necessities.

The turning point came when Muluken's younger sister stumbled upon an agency advertising opportunities for travel to Lebanon, requiring an initial payment of \$100. Encouraged by her sister, Muluken considered this option, realizing she had nothing to lose given her struggles in life. Then, she sold her gold necklace to pay for her passport and migrated irregularly to Lebanon after acquiring a visa. However, upon arrival, she found herself in a remote desert area bordering Israel, far from the urban setting she imagined.

“Initially, the agency informed me that I would be working in the capital city, something I was looking forward to. However, upon arriving at the family’s home, which is located in a remote and desolate area, I was perplexed by the substantial disparity between what the agency promised, and the reality of my employment and I even thought that may be the employers took me by mistake.”

Her employers were an elderly couple residing in a three-storey house with their daughter who is taking one floor on her own. A few weeks later, she discovered that her employer’s daughter also had an Ethiopian maid who assisted her in adjusting to the environment, translating her employers’ requests, and teaching her the local language. However, Muluken wasn’t getting enough food. The wife was giving her only few breads per day to eat and her weight started decreasing significantly by the day.

“When the husband gave me three eggs to eat after noticing my situation, the wife saw and snatched the eggs from my hand, causing a huge fight between the husband and the wife,” Muluken recounted. The daughter living upstairs, tried to reconcile the situation by informing her mother that she needs to eat properly to work effectively. Despite some progress following this intervention, Muluken continued to endure lack of food, relying on the goodwill of the daughter, who gave her meals occasionally.

While still dealing with the frustrating circumstances related to food, she faced an even larger problem few months later when various family members including their children returned to Lebanon to spend the summer with their families. Suddenly, the building that had housed three families was stormed by 19 households, leaving only two maids to do all the household duties. Muluken found herself with little time to rest and eat much alone sleep since she was continually called upon to cook, clean, and



wash clothes. Standing for more than twelve hours a day had an effect on her legs, causing pain and difficulties sleeping.

After few months of enduring these conditions, Muluken learned from the other Ethiopian maid, that her employers were planning to relocate to the US and intended to send both maids back to Ethiopia. Determined to remain in Lebanon, Muluken and the other Ethiopian maid decided to escape from the household leaving their passports and work permits behind. Despite initially struggling to find employment without the Iqama (residence permit), Muluken finally found work as a cleaner three days a week, allowing her to afford her own flat with a roommate. She tried to regularise her immigration status with the aid of a new sponsor, but her former employer wanted money before providing her paperwork. Hence, she worked for nearly a year to save \$2,500 and pay off her former employer and ultimately obtained her passport and Iqama allowing her to work in Lebanon freely.

However, after working for few years, suddenly her health began to suffer and she had a critical condition that required immediate attention, she persuaded her employer to return to Ethiopia for treatment. After undergoing surgery and rehabilitating for four months in Ethiopia, she returned to Lebanon, only to confront further obstacles with her health and the country's declining economic and political condition. Despite her personal challenges, Muluken remained committed to supporting her family back in Ethiopia, particularly her younger sister and her 3 children. Over seven years, she provided financial assistance to ensure her niece and nephews could pursue higher education.

After working in Lebanon for 14 years, Muluken decided to return to Ethiopia as she encountered a recurring medical condition that required treatment. Additionally, she faced challenges finding stable employment in Lebanon due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Up on her return, Muluken heard about the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) 15-day intensive programme for returnees that was organised by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Better Regional Migration (BRMM) Programme financed by the UK FCDO through word of mouth in Ledeta Subcity, Addis Ababa where registration for returnees was taking place.

The training imparted valuable knowledge on financial management, entrepreneurship, and self-prioritization, empowering Muluken to start again and pursue her goals with confidence. Reflecting on this opportunity, she expressed, *"If every returnee took this training before they migrated, we all would've reached an immense success in life by now."* She emphasized the invaluable knowledge gained from the training, in terms of financial management and saving skills, as well as entrepreneurial insights, inspiring her to open a day-care centre.

Muluken emphasised the importance of not overlooking small opportunities and learning to prioritize one's own needs, especially for migrant workers who may face exploitation and lack of support. Overall, Muluken viewed the training as a catalyst for positive change, enabling her to shift her mindset and take meaningful steps towards a better future.