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M., who fled Gaza after being forced into a series of temporary marriages with older men, last week.

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After Haaretz report: Gazan ex-prostitute given residence permit

After 18 months of being exploited in Israel, M. was not allowed to stay at a shelter for survivors of prostitution because she has no legal status

Bar Peleg

Israel's Civil Administration on Tuesday allowed M., a survivor of prostitution who had escaped the Gaza Strip, to remain in Israel for two weeks while they try to find her a place in a shelter for women in sex work. The decision follows a Haaretz report detailing how M. was refused a bed in a shelter because she lacked official status in Israel.

M., 27, fled her family in Gaza after they forced her into a series of temporary marriages with older men – something that's legal under Islamic law but is effectively institutionalized prostitution. For much of the past 18 months, she had been living on the street in Israel, where she also fell

victim to sexual exploitation and forced prostitution.

Last Saturday night, acting on an anonymous complaint that M. was living in Israel illegally, police arrived at where she was staying and asked to see her residence permit. Since she does not have one, they handcuffed her and brought her to the Erez border crossing to deport her to Gaza. M. feared that upon entering the Strip, Hamas would return her to her father and brother, who were looking for her.

The Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories – the Defense Ministry and military department that deals with the West Bank and Gaza – learned of M.'s arrest and had her trans-

ferred to a police station in the south of the country. She told the detectives her story, but police said that the court refused to hold a hearing on her case, and she was expelled to the West Bank. However, on Tuesday, the coordinator's office issued M. a two-week residence permit.

In the coming days, M. will meet with a welfare official from the coordinator's office, who is expected to give her a one-year permit that will allow her to stay at a shelter, where she can access mental health services. She is also expected to meet with someone from the Welfare Ministry, who will likely recommend that she be admitted to a shelter for survivors of prostitution, a ministry source said.

Her attorney, Reut Shaer of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, will file an application for refugee status for M. in a third country.

"After many months of fear, exploitation and suffering, M. can rest easy, at least for the next few days," said Shaer. "This result was achieved thanks to the efforts and care of officials in the welfare system and coordinator's office, which we greatly appreciate. Now there's a light at the end of the tunnel for her, thanks to the special and exceptional intervention by senior officials in her favor. However, not everyone achieves this special intervention; as we have argued before, emergency social assistance for women in extreme and

risky situations should be the rule, not the exception. We will continue working to make this an obligation."

Before M. received her permit, Shaer had sought an emergency solution for her until her status was settled, which would have allowed her to earn a living and begin her rehabilitation process. M. testified at the police station and submitted a detailed affidavit, medical documents and photographs of threatening messages sent to her by her family. But her application for recognition as a victim of human trafficking was denied on the grounds that it did not meet the legal criteria.

At the same time, the police's human trafficking squad transferred some of the evidence to the Tel Aviv District Police to investigate the offenses committed against her. A police source told Haaretz that although M.'s testimony was credible, the evidence did not meet the definition of trafficking and slavery as per the law, so the application had been rejected.

"I just want to live with dignity," M. told Haaretz a week ago, "at least in a safe house, and to find work for myself so I can live. I'm tired of my life, and there's nothing left for me but committing suicide."

She said the courts, shelters and the welfare services had all refused to help her. "Every time I hear of a shelter for women in prostitution, it hurts me. I don't want this life, but what can I do?" she said.

The police said in response: "The police detained the woman for questioning after reports were received that she was a resident of the territories living in Israel, in violation of the law and without a residency permit. Due to the nature of the issue and out of respect for her privacy, we cannot comment on the woman's past." The statement added that she has no such permit.

"In light of the woman's claims," the statement said, "the police even brought her before a court, who refused to hold a hearing on her case; for that reason, she was expelled to the West Bank, as per law."