



Organ Harvesting, Trafficking and Safeguarding

Rapid Read



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INTRODUCTION

The illegal trading and trafficking of human organs appears to be most prevalent in Egypt. Asylum seekers are lured into donating an organ, in the belief that this will pay for their passage to Europe and a better life.

WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?

A recent WHO report suggested that Egypt was a key destination for patients purchasing black market organs. Cairo is a popular destination for asylum seekers from across Africa. However, having registered their status, people are often left in limbo, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

India, Pakistan and the Philippines have also been identified as commercial hubs for organ trafficking; in China, organs are reportedly harvested from executed prisoners. There have also been cases in Kosovo, South Africa, Costa Rica and Turkey.

WHAT LEADS PEOPLE TO DONATE?

Migrants can be offered between \$6,000 and \$10,000 for an organ, which they hope will pay for their passage to Europe, freedom and a better life.

Government crackdowns have forced people smugglers in Egypt and Libya to raise their fees considerably; they refer migrants to organ brokers in Cairo, to raise the money they need for their passage.

An EU-funded clampdown on refugees by the security forces appears to have led to organ brokers increasingly targeting migrants, with the offer of passage.

CONDITIONS SUFFERED BY THE VICTIMS

Kidney donors often do not receive appropriate associated medical care, and surgery itself often takes place in non-hospital environments.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that 40% of the time the broker will disappear after the surgery, without paying the victim at all. In the worst cases, organs are taken by force.

People classed as 'illegal immigrants' fear reporting this crime to the police, afraid of arrest, detention or deportation, giving criminal groups additional power over them.

HOW PREVALENT IS ORGAN TRAFFICKING?

It is a criminal offence to buy or sell a human organ anywhere in the world (except Iran). However, new cases continue to emerge.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has documented over 700 incidents of organ trafficking. However, most cases go unreported, with victims reluctant to come forward. It is thought that globally there are around 10,000 illegal transplants a year.

WHAT IS DRIVING DEMAND?

The Global Observatory on Donation and Transplantation (GODT) says that the number of transplants taking place meets only 10% of global annual demand. A lack of altruistic donations – exacerbated by COVID-19 - means that demand has intensified.

This shortage of organs has led to a reliance on criminal groups, and a law banning organ sales, introduced in 2021, merely pushed the trade further underground.

WHAT COULD BE DONE?

Legal reform and political action are urgently needed, not only to attempt to prohibit this practice, but to address the socio-economic conditions that drive it.

Investment in impoverished communities, and the development of fairer transplant services, would reduce the commercial incentive for illegal transplantation.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

This Rapid Read is based on the work of Dr Seán Columb, of the School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool. His book [Trading Life: Organ Trafficking, Illicit Networks, and Exploitation](#) was published by Stanford University Press in 2020.

Dr Columb has also published two articles on this subject: [Organ Trafficking in Egypt](#) for the Guardian, and [Tracking Down Organ Traffickers and Their Victims](#) for Thomson Reuters.

The [Global Observatory on Donation and Transplantation](#) (GODT) has comprehensive information about donation and transplantation worldwide, including documents on the illegal organ trade, organised by region.