

Human Trafficking for Organs Removal: An Unseen Form of Exploitation

OSCE hosts experts meeting on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings for the Removal of Organs

By [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#)

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Two-day online expert meeting to discuss recent developments and policy gaps in combating trafficking in human beings for the removal of organs concluded yesterday evening. The event was co-organized by the Office of the OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (OSR/CTHB), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and co-sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Despite being mentioned explicitly in the internationally recognized definition of trafficking in human beings, trafficking in human beings for the removal of organs remains one of the least understood and addressed forms of human trafficking globally. The event aimed to share experiences addressing this challenge and examine possible ways to enhance the OSCE region's response. The meeting, gathering legal, criminal justice, medical and victim-protection experts from over 20 OSCE participating States, Partners for Co-operation and international organizations, explored the scope of trafficking in human beings for the removal of organs in the OSCE region. They also discussed recent developments in international and national legal frameworks, and current needs for further awareness-raising, policy, and capacity building efforts.

“One of the things I am struck by is how incredibly challenging it is to respond to trafficking in human beings. And yet I am also optimistic because we have been jointly developing some of the tools we need like on technology and financial investigations,” OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Valiant Richey said.

Exploitation without borders

While the number of identified victims of this form of trafficking remains limited, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicates that this highly lucrative form of human trafficking is perpetrated by organized criminal networks able to operate over prolonged periods with high numbers of victims before being caught. Many participants pointed out the inadequacy of the legal instruments currently in use, and the crucial necessity to enhance cooperation between countries to make perpetrators accountable.

Participants stressed that attention needs to be devoted to situations with patients traveling abroad to get a transplant or coming from abroad with a donor. The crime often has a transboundary element, that makes it much harder for investigators and prosecutors to trace all the components of the crime and exercise jurisdiction over cases often encompassing numerous countries (victim from one country, the broker from another, recruiting in a third, for the surgery taking place in a fourth, possibly with a recipient for yet another country, for example). Without international judicial cooperation, these crimes - even when detected- will hardly be successfully prosecuted.

The illegal organ trade is a crime involving global financial transactions at the expense of the most vulnerable. The role of financial investigations in detecting and countering flows of money alimending and paying for these illegal services is vital, noted by the participants.

Trafficking in human beings for the removal of organs is reportedly an age-specific and gendered crime, affecting adult males the most. The sale of cells and tissues, including ova, was discussed. During the meeting, a specific case of successful investigation and prosecution by Greeks authorities, in which perpetrators brought to justice, included doctors and lawyers, was presented as a case study.

Several other insightful elements emerged during the meeting. A crucial point in discussions was the critical role that can be played by the medical personnel, both in preventing these crimes from happening but also in reporting dubious situations, including when the origins/donor of the organ to be transplanted are not clear. Some participants suggested that assigning criminal liability to brokers and medical personnel involved could be an effective measure to deter some of these practices and put some pressure on traffickers, who now operate mostly undetected.

Participants raised difficulties in establishing contact with victims of this form of trafficking. They encouraged to think of ways to build CTHB practitioners' capacity and medical personnel to improve the identification of such victims. Better identification could also lead to enhanced assistance to survivors, which today is mostly lacking. And especially for such an unknown and unaddressed form of trafficking, engaging with and listening to survivors is crucial to understand the mechanism governing it.

The OSCE Special Representative and Coordinator on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings closed the discussions by saying that

“this two-day meeting served as an excellent basis upon which the OSCE will build future activities on the issue. We shed some light on a largely unaddressed issue, and we look forward to working with the wide range of our partners on a list of concrete recommendations”.

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